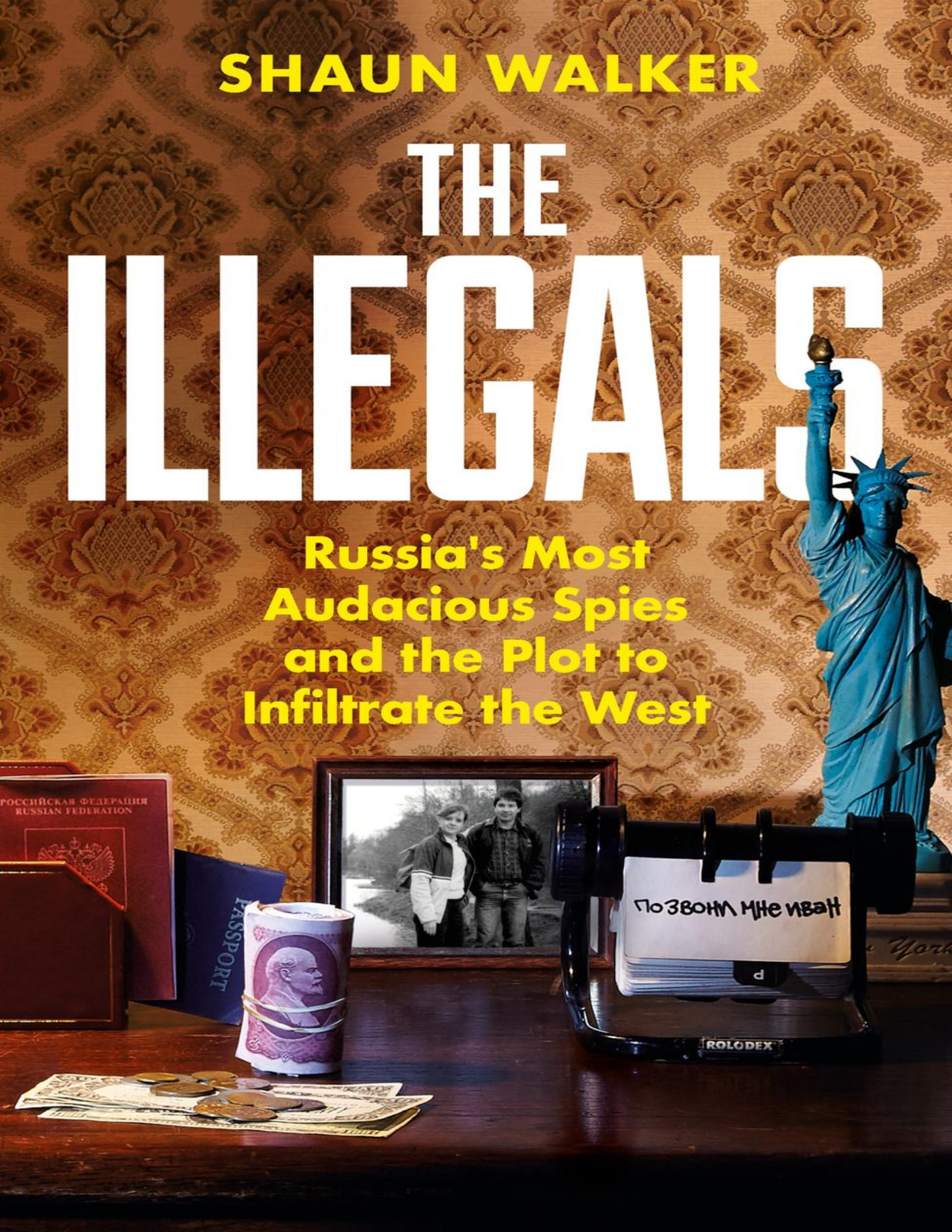
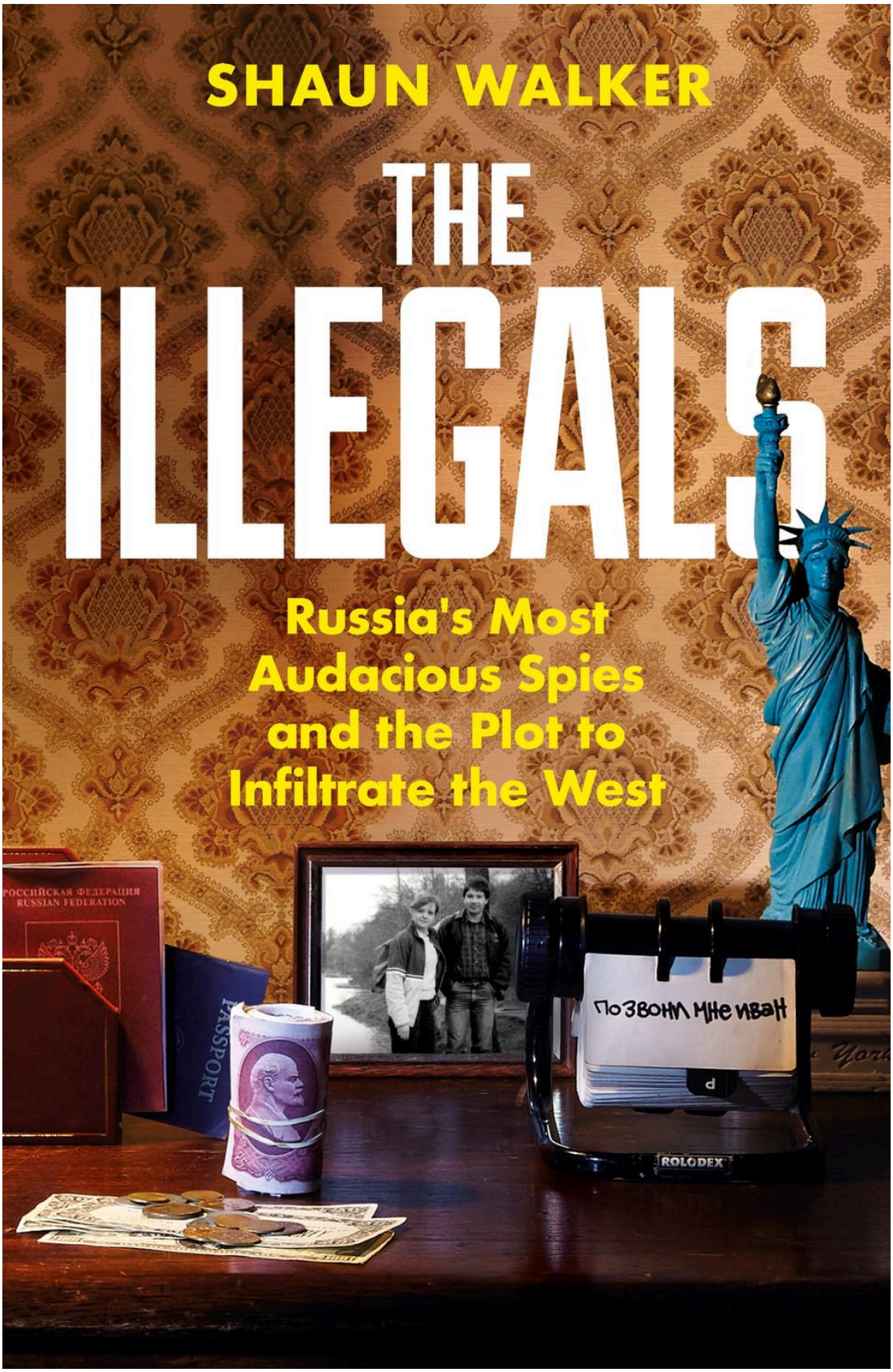
SHAUN WALKER

THE ILLEGALS

Russia's Most Audacious Spies and the Plot to Infiltrate the West

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РОССИЙСКАЯ ФЕДЕРАЦИЯ
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THE ILLEGALS

RUSSIA'S MOST AUDACIOUS SPIES
AND THE PLOT TO INFILTRATE THE WEST

SHAUN WALKER

Profile Books

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THE ILLEGALS

Introduction

It was a muggy, overcast afternoon in June 2010 when Ann Foley's life unravelled. The day had got off to a pleasant enough start; Ann and her husband, Don, took their two sons, Tim and Alex, for a celebratory lunch at an Indian restaurant not far from the family home in Cambridge, Massachusetts. It was Tim's twentieth birthday, and he was back from DC for the summer after finishing his sophomore year at George Washington University. After the meal, the four walked back to the house that Don and Ann had purchased near Harvard Square just a few weeks before. With three storeys and a portico over the front door, it was by far the grandest place they had ever lived, reflecting the family's improving fortunes. Don's consultancy start-up was doing well, while Ann had recently taken a job in real estate. In the living room, Don opened a bottle of champagne, to prolong the festivities. After a toast, Tim went upstairs to his bedroom. A bit later, there was a loud knocking at the door. Ann thought it must be friends of Tim's, coming to wish him a happy birthday. 'A surprise visit,' she called out to Alex, who was on his way up the stairs to check on his older brother. She opened the door to a group of men dressed in black. 'FBI,' they shouted, pushing their way in. Two pairs of agents hustled Don and Ann into separate corners of the open-plan living room and snapped cuffs on their wrists. Later, Alex watched through the windows as his parents were marched out of the front door, down the red-brick path, and into waiting black cars. The officers declined to tell the two brothers what was going on, but Alex assumed there must have been a terrible mistake. He couldn't imagine what his rather boring parents could have done to warrant this kind of dramatic raid.

Nine years after the arrests, on a warm Moscow afternoon in the summer of 2019, I made my way to meet the woman who had once been known as Ann Foley. She had suggested a lively French-themed café, not far from Gorky Park. Most of the faux-rustic tables were occupied by

young, well-dressed Muscovites, part of a nascent middle class that had appeared during the long years of Vladimir Putin's rule. I found a free seat, and after a few minutes she arrived. In her mid-fifties, with a bob of blond hair, she was dressed in a sky-blue blouse and wore a chunky necklace. She smiled warmly, shook my hand, and took a seat. The waiter came, and she ordered a cappuccino in Russian before switching back to English. She spoke both languages flawlessly, but somewhere in the cadences of her English speech I could hear a faint Russian twang. I wondered whether I would have picked up on the accent if I had met her a decade earlier in the United States. And would I have thought, as I did now, that there was something distinctly Slavic about her facial features? Almost certainly not. Back then, nobody had any suspicions about Ann Foley, the friendly part-time real estate agent from Canada.

In reality, Ann Foley was neither friendly nor working in real estate. She was dead. The real Ann Foley was born in September 1962 at Montreal General Hospital and died seven weeks later, of viral meningitis. Her parents, the newly-weds Edward and Pauline, were left with just two small photographs to remind them of the daughter who came into their lives so briefly. More than two decades later, Canadian authorities received a request for a duplicate birth certificate, apparently from Ann Foley herself. No one questioned or cross-checked the request; records were not yet digitised and centralised. The authorities issued a birth certificate and later a passport. Ann Foley came back to life.[1]

The woman sitting opposite me in the café had spent more than twenty years living as Ann Foley from Montreal, right until the day the FBI came knocking, fooling her neighbours, her friends and even her own children. In fact, she was Elena Vavilova, born and raised in Soviet Siberia. Elena was an illegal, a deep-cover spy trained by the KGB. Her husband, Don, was also a KGB illegal; his birth name was Andrei Bezrukov.

Elena and Andrei met in the early 1980s as history students in the Siberian city of Tomsk. KGB spotters selected them for preliminary vetting. Later, they progressed to an arduous training programme lasting several years, moulding their language, mannerisms and identities into those of an ordinary Canadian couple. They left the Soviet Union separately in 1987, staged a meeting in Canada, and began a relationship as if they had just met. They wed a second time, as Don and Ann, and

settled in Toronto, where Elena gave birth to their two sons, Tim and Alex. In 1991, the Soviet Union collapsed, and for a few years the two illegals were left to fend for themselves. But by the end of the decade, the former KGB officer Vladimir Putin had come to power in Moscow. Andrei and Elena began spying again in earnest, now for the SVR, the foreign intelligence agency of the new Russia. As Don Heathfield, Andrei won a place at Harvard's Kennedy School, which enabled the couple to move to Cambridge, with their two children, and establish operations in the United States. While Andrei networked at Harvard, Elena played the role of a self-described 'soccer mom', raising their two sons and taking care of the housework. But once the kids were tucked away in bed, she crept into a back room and decrypted radio messages from Moscow.

Elena and Andrei never spoke a word of Russian to each other and never mentioned Russia to Tim and Alex. Occasionally, Elena took a clandestine trip to South America or Canada to meet with handlers from the SVR away from potential FBI eyes, switching passports en route to cover her tracks. For her sons, she invented stories about mundane errands to explain why she had been away. Nobody Elena interacted with knew anything about her real talents and achievements. She was a trained KGB officer forced to play the role of a run-of-the-mill housewife. When we met in Moscow, I asked her if it had been hard to cope with this disconnect. She sipped her coffee and smiled faintly. People who crave external validation would never make the cut as illegals, she said. 'A spy is an actor, but an actor that doesn't need a public or a stage.'

Elena insisted that she and Andrei would never have told their two sons the truth if the FBI had not come knocking. 'We were responsible for our own security and safety, and it creates a vulnerability if we tell anyone,' she said firmly. She did admit that before the FBI raid the couple had been making tentative plans to retire from espionage and, perhaps one day, move back to Russia. Surely then they would have needed to say something to their sons? 'Well, yes, but another story,' she said, with a jarring matter-of-factness. 'We had so many stories. There was a story for our parents, a story for friends here in Russia. Stories and stories and stories. One more story, that's not a problem for us. Unfortunately, that's just a rule of the game.'

The fundamental role of intelligence agencies is to obtain information about other countries not available through open channels. Much of this work is done in the shadows, and most intelligence agencies use undercover operatives. The simplest way to do so is to disguise spies as diplomats. If caught, they can simply return home, claiming diplomatic immunity. But this also makes it easy for a host nation's counterintelligence services to monitor the operatives. Diplomats are known entities and are tracked carefully. Some intelligence agencies will therefore use a riskier but harder-to-detect option. A spy is dispatched abroad posing as a business executive or other innocent-seeming professional, perhaps carving out a long and successful career in the cover role while all the time secretly developing useful sources and sending back intelligence. The CIA calls this 'non-official cover'.

Moscow's illegals programme took this concept several steps further. The KGB put ordinary Soviet citizens like Elena and Andrei through years of training to transform them into Westerners. They would then spend decades living abroad, blending into their host societies. Anyone who met a Russian diplomat asking lots of questions would certainly wonder if their new contact was a spy. They might also be suspicious of a sociable Russian trade official or an overly friendly Russian journalist. But who would suspect a Canadian real estate agent of being a deep-cover KGB operative?

I first heard about the illegals programme in 2010, when Elena, Andrei and eight others were arrested in the United States and eventually deported to Russia. Back then, I was working as Moscow correspondent for the *Independent* and spent some weeks trying to track down the returned spies. Editors were particularly interested in twenty-eight-year-old Anna Chapman, who had used a cover job as a New York real estate broker to spy for the SVR. A glamorous socialite, she had flirted with the rich and powerful, supposedly with the Kremlin's interests in mind. She seemed to be a character straight from the pages of an airport spy novel, with her flame-red hair, her suggestive photo shoots, and the salacious stories her British ex-husband fed to the tabloids about their sex life. A year after the spies returned to Russia, I finally managed to persuade Anna to meet with me in Moscow. She was a charming and vivacious lunch date, but refused to say anything about her espionage work. Instead, she wanted to talk about her plans for a new fashion line.[2]

In any case, I was more interested in the older illegals and the contortions it must have required to spend decades living in a foreign skin. The SVR kept them well away from the media, but in 2016, I tracked down Elena and Andrei's two sons, Tim and Alex, and interviewed them for a *Guardian* magazine story. The brothers had been stripped of their citizenship by the Canadian government and were suing to have it reinstated. They insisted they had known nothing about their parents' espionage work. Even in the weeks after the FBI round-up back in 2010, Alex told me, he refused to believe the news reports. It was only when he arrived in Moscow and was shown old photographs of his parents wearing KGB uniforms that it finally sank in that his whole upbringing had been a lie. Now he was expected to start a new life in a country he had never previously set foot in. He received a Russian passport identifying him as Alexander Vavilov, a name he could not even pronounce properly. 'Typical high school identity crisis, right?' he said to me, with a wry smile but a noticeable undertone of bitterness.

Fascinated by this twisted family story, I began reading about the illegals programme over the years, and soon realised that there was nothing quite like it in the history of espionage. At times, various intelligence services have disguised operatives as foreign nationals, but never with the scope or scale of the KGB programme. The illegals were something uniquely Russian, rooted in the country's historical experience. The more I read about the programme, the more I felt it offered a fascinating way to tell a much bigger story, of the whole Soviet experiment and its ultimate failure, a century of dramatic and bloody history.

The tale begins in 1917, when Vladimir Lenin's Bolsheviks seized power in the October Revolution. The new Soviet regime had few friends in foreign governments, but could call on a wealth of cosmopolitan, well-travelled Communists, who improvised and ad-libbed their way around the world in various disguises, to help defend the revolution and spread its ideology. These virtuosic, devoted spies became known as the Great Illegals in Soviet intelligence lore. Posing as European aristocrats, Persian merchants or Turkish students, they used cunning, charm and sex to gather intelligence. Many of them evaded detection in the West but were arrested and executed by their own regime in the late 1930s, during Joseph Stalin's Great Terror.

Later, during the Cold War, KGB officers who worked under diplomatic cover found themselves under round-the-clock surveillance from Western counterintelligence agencies and limited in their ability to gather secret information. Illegals, who had no discernible links to either Moscow or Communism, could live and travel free from suspicion. The KGB drew up ambitious plans to plant large numbers of illegals inside the United States. But the Soviets no longer had a recruitment pool of well-travelled polyglots. Instead, the KGB was forced to recruit ordinary Soviet citizens, giving them years of training to mould them into convincing Westerners.

Many Cold War illegals living in the West were told simply to lie low and wait. If tension escalated to the point that diplomatic relations with Moscow were severed, illegal sleeper cells could activate and continue the KGB's work behind enemy lines. But these long-term missions, which forced illegals to spend years isolated from their families, friends and homeland, took a major psychological toll. Many cracked under the pressure: some had breakdowns; others defected or were caught. Few had happy personal lives.

Most espionage using human sources requires deception, but illegals deceived in a particularly intimate way. In KGB lore, this psychological burden was something to be proud of and spoke to the ideological mission of the Soviet state. 'Only an intelligence service which works for a great cause can ask for such a sacrifice from its officers,' enthused the British KGB agent George Blake, explaining why none of the Western services used illegals.[3]

For all the lofty rhetoric, by the 1980s the revolutionary fervour of the early Soviet Union had given way to a plodding bureaucracy. Widespread discontent, combined with a worsening economic situation, eventually led to the Soviet collapse, ushering in a new era in which Russia and the United States were now meant to be partners. In one of his first acts as president of newly independent Russia, Boris Yeltsin disbanded the KGB. The instructions that illegals received in weekly radio messages simply stopped coming. Some returned home; others, like Andrei and Elena, had become comfortable in their cover identities and decided to remain living in them.

A decade later, Vladimir Putin became president and began gradually restoring Russia's spying capabilities. Putin had spent his own years in

the KGB working as an illegals support officer, and he retained a fondness for the programme. Illegals who had stayed in the field began receiving their coded instructions once more, and in Moscow, a fresh batch of operatives underwent training.

When the FBI rounded up Elena, Andrei and others in 2010, in the United States there was a sense of wonder at the audaciousness of the illegals programme, but also an amused confusion: it felt as if the Kremlin were stuck in the Cold War, using outdated and pointlessly time-consuming methods of espionage that had little relevance in the twenty-first century. Yet behind the scenes, Russia's intelligence operations were growing more nimble and more brazen. 'Flying illegals' based in Moscow flew out on short-term missions to assassinate enemies of the Kremlin abroad. A new army of 'virtual illegals' impersonated Westerners on social media and were a key part of Russia's attempts to meddle in foreign elections. Even if the era of long-term illegals seemed to be over, the concepts underpinning their work remained at the heart of Russian intelligence operations.

In February 2022, Putin ordered the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, a decision that would result in horrific bloodshed and destroy any lingering goodwill in Moscow's relations with the West, which became more perilous than at any time since the height of the Cold War. In June, four months after the invasion, Putin travelled to the SVR headquarters outside Moscow to mark the centenary of the official launch of the first Soviet illegals department. He paid tribute to the illegals of the past, who had spent decades far from home serving the motherland, and to the illegals who 'right now are carrying out unique operations' across the globe. By this point, Western countries had expelled hundreds of Russian diplomats from embassies and consulates in response to the invasion of Ukraine. The majority were spies working under diplomatic cover, and their expulsion dramatically reduced Russia's espionage capabilities just as relations with the West were at an all-time low. Moscow's spy agencies had to shift some of the burden onto its illegal networks, which in turn made them more vulnerable to exposure. Over the following year, numerous illegals were unmasked. They included a Peruvian jewellery designer living in Italy, an Argentinian art gallery owner based in Slovenia, and an Austrian Brazilian who ran a 3-D printing business in

Rio de Janeiro. Under their exotic cover identities, all of them were as Russian as vodka and herring.

There is little doubt that these captured spies will be replaced with new ones. At numerous points during the century of history covered in this book, the era of the illegals seemed to be over. Each time, Russia's spymasters resurrected the programme. Now, in a network of nondescript SVR apartments scattered around Moscow, a new generation of operatives are almost certainly undergoing preparation for their missions – methodically honing the pronunciation of target languages, studying archives of foreign newspapers and magazines to take note of salient cultural and social context, and memorising the granular detail of their cover stories. Before long, these new illegals will be dispatched to live ostensibly mundane lives, in various locations across the globe, while secretly working to advance Moscow's agenda.

A Note on Sources and Terminology

The illegals directorate of the KGB was the most secret part of one of the world's most secretive organisations. The KGB archive in Moscow is firmly closed, and the SVR press service ignored my requests. Luckily, many people were more forthcoming. I conducted hundreds of interviews, including with former illegals, their descendants, counterintelligence professionals, and people with whom illegals crossed paths in one or another of their identities. Most of these people had never spoken publicly about their experiences.

I made extensive use of the work of the former KGB archivist Vasily Mitrokhin, who secretly copied files in the archive, day after day for many years, until he retired from the service in 1984. Thousands of pages of notes, typed up by Mitrokhin at his dacha outside Moscow, are now available to view at an archive in Cambridge, and many of them cover illegals.

To help tease out the life stories of illegals over the years, I used declassified FBI and MI5 files, as well as archives in more than a dozen countries. I have also drawn on many brilliant books about spies, the KGB and the broader historical context. These are credited in the endnotes and bibliography. It was not always possible to find corroborating sources for the stories told by various illegals. I have tried to avoid speculation, and to note moments that may be based on unreliable memories. As with any book on intelligence, some gaps remain. These will only be filled when the Russian archives open fully, something that is unlikely to happen anytime soon.

The KGB specialised in lengthy acronyms and confusing terminology. The service itself changed names frequently, and regularly revised its complex organisational structure and the names of departments that dealt with illegals. I have tried to keep the book free from this organisational clutter where possible. Readers can find a guide to the chronology of the

KGB’s various iterations and its structure at the back of the book, as well as a glossary of relevant terminology.

PART ONE

The First Illegals

1

Roots:

The Bolshevik Underground

In the predawn gloom of a damp autumn morning in October 1902, a hansom cab drew up outside 30 Holford Street, one of a terrace of three-storey houses not far from London's St Pancras Station. A man in his early twenties, his wiry frame wrapped in a dark cloak, sprang from the passenger compartment. In halting English, he told the driver to wait: he had no money. The man had reached the final destination of a long journey that had started in the isolated settlement of Verkholensk in deepest Siberia. He had travelled by sleigh, boat and train, assuming several different identities at various points during the epic voyage via St Petersburg, Munich and Vienna. He found the door he was looking for and rapped out three loud knocks.

The lodgings, which comprised two shabby and sparsely furnished rooms, were rented from a widowed dressmaker by a German couple who had arrived in London a few months earlier. Dr Jacob Richter was an intense man in his early thirties, prematurely bald and with a neatly clipped moustache and goatee beard. Richter noted the triple knock, code for a visitor on secret business, and his bleary-eyed wife jumped out of bed to answer the door. Faced with an evidently just-roused Mrs Richter, the man on the doorstep apologised for not waiting until a more civilised hour. He explained, in excited bursts of quick-fire Russian, that he was still charged with energy due to his recent escape from Siberia and that he hoped the couple had been warned about his arrival. He also mentioned, rather sheepishly, that they would need to pay for his cab.

Dr Richter, peering over his wife's shoulder, quickly guessed the identity of the visitor.

'Aha!' he exclaimed with enthusiasm. 'The Pen has arrived!'[1]

Dr Richter's real name was Vladimir Ulyanov. He was a political theorist from the Social Democrats, a fringe party fighting the tsarist

regime in Russia. ‘Richter’ was just one of more than a hundred aliases he used during his long years in the underground. He later became known to the world under the assumed name with which he made his reputation as a Marxist theorist – Lenin.

Lev Bronstein, Lenin’s visitor that morning in October 1902, also went through dozens of aliases in the years leading up to the Russian Revolution. Lenin knew him as the Pen because of the young firebrand’s ability to write impassioned, coruscating prose. Bronstein would become famous under the name he had used on some papers forged hastily for this most recent Siberian escape: Trotsky. It was the first meeting of two men who, fifteen years later, would dramatically alter the course of global history.

The Bolsheviks, Lenin’s wing of the Social Democrats, were a small but ruthlessly well-organised group. The tsar’s secret police, the Okhrana, invested huge resources into tracking and infiltrating revolutionary movements. To keep the Okhrana off their scent, the Bolsheviks employed a code known as *konspiratsiya*, the meaning of which was closer to ‘subterfuge’ than to the English ‘conspiracy’. A set of complex rules, a rigid behavioural code, and a way of life, the overarching aim of *konspiratsiya* was to keep party operatives undercover and undetected, and it was used by many groups of anti-tsarist revolutionaries.

By the time Trotsky met Lenin in London, both men were already well versed in the tenets of *konspiratsiya.* Over the next decade, false papers and pseudonyms became a matter of course among party operatives, and in sensitive correspondence they used code names or numbers to hide the real identities of comrades. Sometimes, letters containing secret plans were written in lemon juice or chlorine, transposed over a letter written in ink on an innocuous theme, and addressed to an invented recipient. The invisible writing could later be ‘developed’ by treating the pages with chemicals to reveal the hidden text.[2]

Lenin’s wife, Nadezhda Krupskaya (‘Mrs Richter’), oversaw day-to-day contact between those in the underground inside Russia and ‘the Centre’, as Lenin and the party leadership in exile were known. She

deciphered secret letters, developed new codes to stay ahead of the Okhrana, and briefed comrades who arrived in London.[3]

Outside Russia, Lenin and Krupskaya could afford to relax the rules of *konspiratsiya* a little. His flimsy charade as Dr Richter did not stand up to much scrutiny: he often addressed gatherings of workers in London in Russian, and meetings with comrades arriving from elsewhere in Europe were held under thin pretext – in one case disguised as a conference of foreign barbers in the upstairs room of a London pub. Police in most European countries largely left Russian émigrés alone.[4]

Surviving undercover inside Russia was a different matter entirely, with the Okhrana an ever-present danger. In 1905, Lenin decided he should return to the country after a massacre by the tsar's troops in St Petersburg stirred revolutionary sentiment. He travelled back to his homeland using false British papers in the name of William Frey. Krupskaya joined him a few days later, trailed on the train into Russia by an Okhrana spy. In St Petersburg, the couple tried to lie low in an apartment belonging to friends of Lenin's sister, but they soon realised the Okhrana had the place under close surveillance. They slipped out of the apartment, evaded the watchers, and spent the next few days moving between a succession of Bolshevik safe houses. Fearful of being arrested and sent back to Siberia, Lenin only occasionally ventured outside.

One day in March 1906, Lenin noticed he was being followed, so he slipped his tail and scurried to the railway station. He jumped on a train to Finland, where he hid for a while. He returned in May, this time using Russian documents with the surname Chkheidze; Krupskaya had acquired a passport that identified her as Praskoviya Onegina. Despite their disguises and false papers, the couple soon had to flee again for the relative safety of Finland. There, Lenin assumed yet another identity – that of Professor Müller, a German geologist studying Finnish limestone deposits. From Finland, he sent couriers back into Russia with instructions and texts for dissemination. Toward the end of 1907, the Okhrana began to close in on his Finnish hideout, forcing him to make a dramatic escape: he jumped off a moving train, then sped across a barely frozen strip of water by sledge. Finally, he made it to the safety of Geneva.[5] Although he was still a marginal figure on the Russian political scene, Lenin was already too well known to stay at liberty inside the

Russian Empire, even in disguise. He would not return to Russia until 1917, the year of the revolution.

Back in the safety of Western Europe, Lenin set about defining Bolshevik strategy in the new political environment. He divided activities into two different categories: ‘legal’ and ‘illegal’ party work. Legal work included everything the Bolsheviks could do openly, such as agitation among workers, taking part in public debates, or pushing to create labour unions and cooperatives. ‘Illegal’ work included the distribution of radical literature and the coordination of the party underground. Not all ‘illegal’ work was necessarily outside the law, just as not all ‘legal’ work was fully compliant. A better rendering of the meaning of the Russian word *nelegalnaya* in this context is ‘clandestine’ or ‘underground’. Legal party activists operated in the open, using their own name, while illegals disguised their real purpose and often their identities too. They employed the rules of *konspiratsiya* in their contacts with the party’s organisational headquarters, the Centre.

Lenin believed that to be successful, the Bolsheviks had to combine both legal and illegal work, seizing on concessions the regime made but also working underground to exploit its weaknesses.[6] Crossovers between the two networks were kept to a minimum, and among the illegals compartmentalisation was practised wherever possible. Each illegal maintained direct contact with the Centre, but none with other illegals. That way, if one should be caught, the others were not compromised.

Across the Russian Empire, Bolshevik activists led these clandestine existences to drum up support and raise money for the cause. In the southern city of Baku, the empire’s oil capital, Iosif Dzhugashvili, who later became known as Stalin, plotted bank robberies, kidnappings and extortion schemes to raise funds for party coffers. He was known to most of those he encountered only by his code name, Koba, and frequently changed address to throw the Okhrana off his scent. Stalin devised virtuosic embellishments to the standard rules of *konspiratsiya:* On one occasion, he told a girlfriend to put some secret documents in a coffin, then bury it in a graveyard while acting out the role of a grieving sister bidding farewell to her younger brother. Once a few days had passed, another agent exhumed the ‘body’.

Later, in St Petersburg, Stalin became skilled in the art of evading his Okhrana tails, slipping in and out of back entrances and darting into courtyards as he paced the city's avenues and canal embankments. He was arrested many times and made numerous escapes from Siberian exile using forged papers. He fled one settlement by steamboat, disguised as a woman in a long dress. For travel outside the Russian Empire, Stalin used an array of different documents, and in the space of a few months he could surface across Europe posing as a Russian, a Persian or an Armenian merchant.[7]

Other Bolsheviks lived extended illegal lives right under the noses of the Okhrana, by adhering carefully to the codes of *konspiratsiya.* As the writer Victor Serge put it, 'The revolutionaries were able to live illegally in the main cities of Russia for months or years at a time. They were able to turn themselves, as the case required, into pedlars, coachmen, "rich foreigners" or servants.'[8]

Many of the skills and concepts that underpinned the Bolshevik struggle against the tsarist regime would prove remarkably durable. One hundred years later, Russian foreign intelligence was still divided into legal and illegal operatives, and its headquarters was still widely referred to as the Centre. An apartment used for secret meetings was still known as a *konskvartira.* The intervening century had seen innumerable technological advances, but much of the basic terminology and structure used in Lenin's fight against the tsarist regime would have been familiar to Elena and the other illegals who were rounded up in the United States in 2010.

In February 1917, as Russia's armies were bogged down fighting in World War I and economic strife and food shortages increased at home, popular discontent reached a tipping point and the tsar was forced to abdicate. A temporary government took charge. In October, Lenin and the Bolsheviks mounted a coup, which through the later lens of Soviet propaganda became known as the Great October Socialist Revolution. On the night of the coup, an exhausted but exhilarated Lenin arrived at the Smolny Institute, a former girls' school that now served as Bolshevik headquarters, disguised in a wig and thick glasses. 'From persecution and a life underground, to come so quickly into power,' he exclaimed to Trotsky in disbelief, waving his hands in the air and looking for the right

words. He finally found them, in German. ‘*Es schwindelt.*’ It makes you dizzy.

Lenin and his band of revolutionaries had won formal power, but they still faced the colossal task of implementing and retaining it across the vast Russian landmass. Lenin was sure that state institutions would eventually wither away, the evolving workers’ paradise rendering them meaningless. However, to achieve this happy end point, he believed an interim period of ruthless state violence was required.

Lenin set up a security service, the Cheka, to organise the terror that was to come, and appointed Felix Dzerzhinsky, a fanatical Polish Bolshevik who had spent many years in exile in Siberia, as its head. The Cheka quickly grew to a huge fighting force that could be unleashed on political and class enemies. It would be one of the main actors in a bloody civil war that pitted the Bolshevik Reds against the Whites, a mix of pro-tsarist regiments and foreign contingents, often united by little more than their hatred of Bolshevism. The Civil War was an existential battle for both sides and was marked by ruthless violence and cruelty. The front lines changed swiftly and unpredictably, and the Bolshevik heritage of *konspiratsiya*, honed over two decades of underground work using disguises and false identities, became priceless. In places where the Whites made territorial gains, Bolshevik agents were ordered to stay put and help coordinate resistance efforts. In June 1919, the Cheka set up an illegal operations department to manage the network of those deliberately ‘left behind’.[9]

When the Bolsheviks emerged victorious from the Civil War in 1921, the Cheka again repurposed this legacy. Lenin’s concept of combining legal work with the extensive use of illegals would become the defining feature of how the new Soviet state ran its intelligence services for decades to come. The man who first put these ideas into practice, the father of Russian foreign intelligence, knew all about the importance of illegals. For more than a decade, he had been one.

2

The Old Man:

The First Head of Soviet Foreign Intelligence

One afternoon in the autumn of 1918, a wealthy merchant arrived at a hospital in the remote outpost of Blagoveshchensk, dressed in a grand fox-fur coat capable of staving off the harshest weather. He breezed into the entrance hall and handed his coat to the doorman, together with a healthy 3-rouble tip. Entering one of the wards, he found the bed he was looking for, offered its occupant a warm greeting, and pulled up a chair.

The patient, a skinny man of almost childlike proportions, strained to sit up in the bed. He was undergoing treatment for a lung condition, and he struggled to make himself heard as he greeted his visitor.

‘Are you continuing with your trade and speculation?’

‘If anyone knows how to trade, it’s me, but the conditions now are awful. The front lines are everywhere,’ the merchant responded sorrowfully. Others in the ward, many of them White officers injured in battle, looked up from their beds, eager to hear the latest news from the front.

Blagoveshchensk, nearly four thousand miles from the Russian capital, sat just across the expansive Amur River from Chinese Manchuria. Here in the far east of the former tsarist empire, the Civil War had been complicated by the intervention of tens of thousands of Japanese troops, loosely allied with the White forces. Japanese soldiers patrolled the streets of Blagoveshchensk; the White authorities hunted down Bolshevik revolutionaries and their sympathisers.

In the ward that afternoon, the two men cursed the Bolshevik partisans for ruining the lives of honest merchants. As evening drew in, the merchant placed a carefully wrapped gift for his friend on the bedside table. Wishing the patient a speedy recovery, he got up to leave. As the two men bade each other farewell, they loudly shared their hopes for an imminent White victory and the final defeat of the Bolshevik plague.

Later, the man in the hospital bed opened the present and found a scrap of paper tucked into the wrapping, with a scrawled handwritten message: ‘Lenin remembers you, and is sure that the workers of the Far East will win.’[1]

The frail patient really did have a serious lung condition, but everything else about his stay in the hospital was not what it seemed. He was one of the leading Bolshevik revolutionaries coordinating the fight in the eastern reaches of the tsar’s former domains. At just thirty-five he was already considered a veteran of the clandestine movement; his fragile frame and bookish look belied a steely constitution and a fanatical devotion to the cause. At various times, he had been known as Comrade Anatoly, Pavel-with-Glasses, Mikhail Moskvin, Mr Mursky and Merchant Stolchevsky. His real name was Meer Trilisser, born in 1883 to Jewish parents in the southern Russian city of Astrakhan.

Meer and his younger brother David joined the revolutionary underground as teenagers, like many intelligent and ambitious Jews across the Russian Empire who were shut out from most of the tsarist system’s educational and career opportunities. By 1906, Meer was responsible for preparing makeshift Bolshevik military units for a potential violent uprising against tsarist rule. He travelled on false papers across European Russia to meet with underground groups and gauge their battle readiness and adherence to the codes of *konspiratsiya*.[2] In late 1906, living on illegal papers in the city of Vyborg, he masterminded an audacious prison break, which involved drugging the prison guards at a celebratory ball, stealing the keys, and setting the inmates free. The Okhrana apprehended him in 1907, and after a long interrogation and trial he was transferred to Shlisselburg, a fortress prison in St Petersburg designed to house the tsar’s most dangerous political opponents.[3] In 1914, an unrepentant Trilisser was released from the fortress and sent into permanent exile near the Siberian city of Irkutsk.[4]

Trilisser’s dreary days of exile came to an end following the February Revolution, when the new government granted amnesty to political prisoners. After the October Revolution he became a key player in the push to enforce the Bolshevik takeover thousands of miles from St Petersburg. When the Whites seized control of Blagoveshchensk,

Trilisser first went to ground in a *konskvartira*, then emerged playing the role of a wounded White sympathiser. His very real lung problems served as the perfect cover for an extended stay in a hospital full of White officers, where he could receive medical treatment and gather important intelligence simultaneously. Visitors such as the 'merchant' – in fact another Bolshevik illegal operative – allowed for communication with the Centre.

In December 1918, the hospital discharged Trilisser, and he set to work rallying a Bolshevik partisan force for another military onslaught against the White armies. Several of his comrades had been captured and executed, so he and other Bolsheviks withdrew to remote villages, where they held secret meetings to plan their strategy. He met, and fell in love with, a young teacher named Olga who had also been exiled to Siberia. They married, and she became his co-conspirator. On one occasion, they planned a daring mission in which he crossed the Amur River by evading White patrols and returning from the Chinese side with a stock of medicines and explosives. Trilisser also developed a system of codes to decrease the chance of White forces deciphering the messages sent to Moscow. He was twice detained and tortured by White counterintelligence agents, but both times he was able to escape with the help of comrades.[5] In February 1920, the Reds finally gained control of Blagoveshchensk. It meant Trilisser could end his illegal existence and emerge into the open. He gave a triumphant speech at the first legal meeting of the city's Bolsheviks, where more than eight hundred supporters gathered to celebrate the takeover.

Early the next year, Trilisser, along with his wife and their newborn daughter, made the long train journey to Moscow for a Bolshevik party congress that gathered hundreds of leading revolutionaries from around the country to coordinate policy and strategy. Lenin had made Moscow the capital of Russia once again, away from imperial St Petersburg, with its palaces and aristocratic embellishments. As Trilisser's train slowly chugged thousands of miles west, he would have grasped the size of the task facing the Bolsheviks: poverty and famine were rife, starving children begged in the stations, and the trains were sometimes held up by gangs desperate for food.[6] On arrival in the capital, the Trilissers lodged at a hotel taken over by the Bolsheviks for the use of party members.

After more than a decade in prison, exile and undercover, he was finally back in Moscow.

‘Comrades, for the first time we are gathering in conditions when there are no longer enemy forces, supported by the world’s capitalists and imperialists, on our territory,’ Lenin told those assembled in the congress hall on the opening morning. The only way for the Bolsheviks to hold on to power was through ruthless discipline and unity, he said.

As a long-standing proponent of strict party discipline, Trilisser likely had few qualms with this new party line. He was too swept up in the exciting and surreal spectacle of the congress. After all, he had been attending Bolshevik gatherings since they were small rooms of passionate but largely irrelevant émigrés pontificating on points of Marxist theory. Now here they all were discussing how to govern the world’s largest country. He had always believed revolution was inevitable, but seeing evidence of its success in real life was overwhelming.

When the congress finished, Trilisser took up a job in the party’s Central Committee, now effectively the government. Olga also got a job there as a secretary. Husband and wife put in long hours, motivated by revolutionary zeal and a sense that they were contributing to nothing less than the total restructuring of human life. On administrative forms, Trilisser listed his occupation as ‘revolutionary’.[7] There was no time to organise personal luxuries such as childcare, so during the day the Trilissers would leave their infant daughter to crawl around their hotel room unattended. One day, the overcurious child pulled a vase of flowers from the table and drank the stale water from it. She contracted dysentery and died soon after. The couple mourned their daughter, but told themselves that this was not the moment for personal emotions. The success of the revolution was hanging in the balance.[8]

Shortly afterwards, the Cheka head, Felix Dzerzhinsky, came to visit the Trilissers in their hotel room. Like Trilisser, Dzerzhinsky had survived years of grim conditions in tsarist prisons. He wore a goatee beard to hide his disfigured jaw, caused by a particularly harsh beating, and his wrists and ankles were still scarred from manacles. Now he devoted every waking hour to building the Cheka; his work ethic and asceticism earned him the nickname Iron Felix.[9] Dzerzhinsky told Trilisser he wanted to expand the INO, the nascent foreign section of the

Cheka. He recognised a fellow fanatic in his old comrade, a man who had not let even the death of his infant daughter disrupt his work, and believed Trilisser's years of experience undercover would make him a useful addition to the INO.

The next morning, Trilisser reported to Cheka headquarters at Number 2, Lubyanka Square. The early INO had just a few dozen employees, who worked from the fourth floor of the building, across the internal courtyard from the shuttered windows of the Cheka prison, where suspected enemies of the revolution spent their final days before execution. Trilisser started as deputy chief of the INO; within a few months he had been promoted to lead it.

Trilisser was known, affectionately, as 'the old man', despite being only forty. His favoured outfit consisted of a pince-nez and *kosovorotka*, a traditional Russian tunic with the buttons skewed to one side, which made him look more like a village elder than the head of a ruthless espionage organisation. He was barely five feet tall, meaning most of his subordinates towered head and shoulders above him, creating a comical effect when they walked Lubyanka's long corridors together. Most days, Trilisser could be found in his cavernous office, sitting at a desk with a large bank of telephones that could connect him in an instant to various parts of the government.[10] He sat with his back to the window, scribbling in pencil while chain-smoking cigarettes. The office was a place of heated discussions, with subordinates brainstorming missions or arguing about the best way to create solid cover for infiltrating illegals abroad. As in many parts of the new Soviet government, they made up the rules as they went along.

The foreign policy of the newly proclaimed Soviet Union had two overarching goals, and the INO was key to both. The first, as Lenin and his comrades became more secure in their hold on power at home, was to protect the country against attacks from abroad. The Whites had been defeated on the battlefield, but tens of thousands of tsarist sympathisers were still alive and determined to return home soon. In Paris, Prague, Harbin and Constantinople, there were sizeable communities of Russians who believed Communism was merely a brief aberration in the sweep of history. Western European governments were investigating how best they could help the remnants of the White forces regroup. Trilisser's

department was tasked with intercepting and sabotaging these plans. The INO's second task was to help facilitate global revolution. Lenin believed a lone socialist state would not last long surrounded by capitalist foes. The Bolsheviks instructed foreign Communist parties to set up parallel illegal networks alongside official party structures, to help them seize power when the inevitable revolutionary moment arrived.[11]

States had used spies since ancient times, but the concept of an organised, civilian intelligence service was relatively new. Britain's Secret Service Bureau, which would later become MI6, was only founded in 1909, while the United States did not have a formal intelligence service until after the end of World War II. The Bolsheviks attached great importance to foreign intelligence, both because of their own heritage as an underground, clandestine movement and because few countries recognised their government, meaning there were no embassies from which to carry out normal diplomatic work.

During the 1920s, Soviet trade missions and embassies opened in many European cities, and each time Trilisser quickly arranged to send 'legal' INO officers undercover as trade officials or diplomats. However, these diplomatic links were liable to be broken at any moment, which made illegals a more reliable alternative. Trilisser had a roster of operatives at his disposal with previous experience in illegal work, either in the Bolshevik underground or for Communist parties in other countries. Some were Russians, but many were Austrians, Hungarians or Germans, who already spoke multiple languages and were comfortable slipping into the new identities required of them.

Almost all Trilisser's INO associates were men. Many women had played a part in the Bolshevik underground movement, and early Soviet debates on female empowerment were more progressive than those in the West. But the plan for gender equality went the same way as the belief that state structures would wither away in the new socialist utopia. From the beginning, the Soviet political elite was dominated by men, and the Cheka was even more so.[12]

In this macho environment, Trilisser had the reputation of being one of the Cheka's few thoughtful and empathetic leaders, frequently receiving intellectuals and even foreigners to his third-floor office.[13] But for all his civility, Trilisser was still a fanatical Bolshevik, hardened by years of imprisonment, underground work and the violence of the Civil

War. In 1925, he ordered the assassination of Vladimir Nesterovich, a Soviet military intelligence operative who had grown disillusioned and gone into hiding abroad. Two illegals tracked Nesterovich down to the German city of Mainz and poisoned him as he took his morning coffee in a local café. When they reported back details of the mission, Trilisser sent another order: 'You must remove witnesses, especially the daughter of the restaurant owner.'[14] Nobody had promised the revolution would be bloodless.

The top echelons of the government gradually became a privileged elite, and Trilisser acquired some perks, including a driver and a bodyguard to accompany him around Moscow. When Olga gave birth to a boy, the couple were able to make use of a nanny, to ensure the tragedy of their daughter's death would not be repeated. They moved out of their hotel room and into a high-ceilinged apartment in a new building a block away from Lubyanka. The dimensions of this new home were such that Trilisser's son would later remember joyfully riding his bicycle along the apartment's corridors.[15]

Despite these comforts, Trilisser did not become a deskbound bureaucrat. He sometimes went abroad in disguise, to meet with illegals in the field. On one occasion, posing as a specialist on Gothic architecture, he travelled to Berlin, ostensibly to attend an academic conference. While there, he was able to restore contact with a valued German agent and gave the operative instructions on how to travel undetected to Moscow for briefing and training.[16]

Once a month, Trilisser's driver took him on a short trip through the centre of Moscow, from Lubyanka to the headquarters of the Communist International. Founded in March 1919 to aid the cause of revolution across the world, the Comintern, as it was called for short, was nominally independent but in reality subordinate to the Bolshevik government, which hoped it would help spark revolutions in Europe. Trilisser was one of three comrades on the Comintern's secret Commission on Illegal Work, which organised training and support for foreign Communist parties. The other two men on the commission had also been Bolshevik illegals before the revolution: Osip Pyatnitsky had operated an underground printing press from the basement of a fruit shop, while Emelyan Yaroslavsky had lived undercover and robbed banks to fund the Bolshevik cause.

Trotsky, at the end of July 1920, claimed that ‘in almost every country in Europe and America, the class struggle is entering the phase of civil war’. But these anticipated revolutions did not materialise, and the uprisings that did take place were quickly crushed. A watershed moment was the German Communist revolt in October 1923, which failed miserably and led to the outlawing of the Communist Party there. Illegal operations thus became crucial. Trilisser and the others on the commission put together a manual on the rules of *konspiratsiya* to be given to foreign comrades who came to Moscow for training. Marked ‘Top Secret’, the brochure distilled Bolshevik best practices from the past quarter of a century. It provided instructions on organising aliases, procuring false documents, and managing secure communications. It noted that even with strict adherence to all these precautions, illegal work remained a risky business. Following the rules of *konspiratsiya* could be tedious, the brochure admitted, but was essential to help the party organise and, eventually, to overthrow oppressive bourgeois governments.[17]

In 1924, Lenin died at the age of fifty-three. Incapacitated in his final months by a series of strokes, he did not appoint a successor. Over the next few years, Stalin outmanoeuvred all his rivals and by the end of the decade was in full control. Trotsky, his most serious contender for the mantle of Lenin’s heir, was forced into exile.

Stalin championed the concept of ‘socialism in one country’, which held that the Soviet Union should prioritise protecting the gains of its own revolution rather than fomenting it abroad. The INO was now to focus on more traditional intelligence assignments, gathering political and military information about other countries, rather than on sabotage and subversion. Most of the West had come to terms with the idea that the Soviet Union was here to stay, but Moscow had not yet been invited to join the League of Nations, the interwar precursor to the United Nations, and Stalin was convinced Western countries were hatching plots to destroy the Soviet state.

Britain, which Moscow saw as its most dangerous enemy during this period, formally recognised the Soviet Union in 1924, which meant a Soviet embassy opened in London and legal INO officers could be placed there under diplomatic cover. The Soviets also used the All-Russian

Cooperative Society, supposedly a neutral body responsible for Anglo-Soviet trade, as a front for intelligence gathering. But in 1927, British police raided the London offices of the society on Moorgate. Using special machinery to drill through doors, they found a secret room, where workers were hurriedly burning classified documents. The home secretary, William Joynson-Hicks, called the operation 'one of the most nefarious spy systems that it has ever been my lot to meet'.[18] As a result of the scandal, Britain severed diplomatic ties with the Soviet Union. Although relations would be restored in 1929, the episode underlined the fact that Moscow could not rely on legal agents posted in embassies, or even those working under the thin cover of trade emissaries. Trilisser launched a renewed drive to send illegals, who had no discernible Soviet links, to major European capitals and farther afield.

Trilisser's roster of illegals included the flamboyant fabulist Yakov Blyumkin, who travelled the Middle East disguised as a Persian merchant, gathering information on French and British policy. His cover activity was selling ancient religious manuscripts, pilfered from the synagogues of Ukraine and the libraries of Moscow with the sanction of the new, atheist Soviet authorities. Proceeds from the sales helped fund Trilisser's network of agents.[19]

A team of forgers in Lubyanka provided operatives with passports to bolster their new identities. Sometimes, they created passports from scratch, but more often they doctored real documents stolen from foreign embassies or government offices. Passports in the 1920s were relatively flimsy documents of one or two pages. It did not take long to swap photographs, carefully mix inks to recreate official stamps and seals, and end up with watertight fakes.[20]

In 1929, Trilisser sent Georgy Agabekov, an INO officer of Armenian origin, to Istanbul, instructing him to pose as a carpet salesman from Persia's Armenian minority. Agabekov took diamond rings and a chunky gold chain from a storeroom at Lubyanka that held luxury items requisitioned from aristocrats during the revolution. Duly attired and equipped with a false Persian passport, he charmed the Turkish consul in Moscow into granting him a visa. In Istanbul, he was joined by another Soviet illegal, disguised as an Austrian timber merchant who worked as a freelance journalist on the side. The pair went about town explaining that the journalist was looking for the inside track on Turkish affairs and that

he was willing to pay for particularly juicy morsels. The proposition proved attractive enough to entice numerous Turkish officials to part with sensitive information.[21]

Trilisser had built the foundation of a unique espionage programme that would endure in one form or another for the next century. Among this group of devoted, talented actor-spies one man stood out for both the ingenuity of his methods and the impressiveness of his results. He took on the roles, at various times, of the Hungarian count József Perelly, the Canadian timber merchant John Wento, the Greek businessman Alexander S. Gallas, the Dutch artist Hans Galleni, and the British aristocrat Robert Grenville.

His real name was Dmitry Bystrolyotov, and he was perhaps the most talented illegal in the history of the programme.

3

The Fast Flier:

The Greatest of the Great Illegals

The decade after the Bolshevik Revolution was a time of chameleonic reinventions for millions in the new Soviet state. Former aristocrats lost their mansions and furs; workers without so much as a secondary education were catapulted into lofty positions as factory directors or newspaper editors. Even by the standards of the time, however, Dmitry Bystrolyotov's biography stands out as remarkable. His unusual surname, which literally means 'the fast flier', was an apt description for his life trajectory.

Dmitry's mother, Klavdiya, was a strong-willed social activist, engaged with a volunteer group building a model village for peasants in Crimea. She was neither married nor in a relationship when she became pregnant and gave birth to Dmitry in 1901. The pregnancy was a rebellion against suffocating social norms, she later told her son. Dmitry never met his father, though he convinced himself he was a descendant of the Tolstoy family line. According to the stories he would later tell about his youth, his mother sent him at the age of three to St Petersburg, where he was placed under the protection of an aristocratic widow. There, he learned French, German and English and was trained in fencing and fine arts. On the occasions he met with his mother, mutual resentment simmered. She disdained his privileged surroundings, while he felt anger that she had abandoned him and now showed him little tenderness.

In 1915, he returned to live with his mother in Anapa, on the Black Sea coastline. He entered the local maritime academy, which mixed traditional schooling with preparation for a life at sea. A passionate and brooding teenager, Dmitry acquired oil paints and spent long hours sketching seascapes and portraits, revealing a remarkable artistic talent. He devoured Dostoyevsky and pondered life's big questions as revolution swept the country. The first Bolshevik leader of Anapa, twenty-seven-

year-old Pavel Protapov, was assassinated in April 1918, and five former tsarist army soldiers were sentenced to death for the murder. In August, the Whites took over and hanged several leading local Bolsheviks. The public executions carried out by both sides were watched by 'the same crowds, eating the same sunflower seeds', Dmitry remembered later.[1]

In 1919, with the Whites still in control, Dmitry graduated from maritime school. He was drafted for service aboard the *Rion*, a huge cargo ship that set sail in August for Sevastopol in Crimea, as part of the White fleet. The peninsula remained a White stronghold, but nobody knew for sure how long that would last. Newspapers reported 'revelry, drunkenness, and orgies' in the city as a kind of nervous hysteria took hold. Dmitry, who had just turned eighteen, felt helpless, like a leaf tossed through the air by gusts of wind.[2] In early 1920, with the Whites fighting among themselves and the Reds approaching Crimea, he found a ship leaving for Constantinople and managed to stow away in the coal storeroom.

He had left a violent upheaval accompanying the end of one imperial nation and crossed the Black Sea to arrive in another. Constantinople was under joint British, French and Italian occupation, with the Ottoman Empire on its last legs and the nationalist forces of Mustafa Kemal gathering strength. The city was teeming with refugees: Armenians fleeing Anatolia, Muslims displaced from Greece and the Balkans, and as the months went by, more and more Russians, escaping the Red advance. Many were selling their last furs and pearls for food. By the end of 1921, one in six of Constantinople's residents was a Russian speaker. The language could be heard throughout the city, in the markets, restaurants and nightclubs.[3]

Dmitry managed to find work on a boat plying the Black Sea shoreline. The ship had a multinational crew who had little in common except for their muscular builds. They spotted an easy target in the bookish painter who seemed too refined for the hard life on deck. To curtail the abuse, Dmitry bought a knife in one of the ports and vowed to slice up the next person who wronged him. Before long, he had grown accustomed to the heavy drinking, the frequent fights, and the visits to brothels on shore. 'I was a sheep pretending to be a wolf, but I kept pretending until I eventually became one,' he later remembered.[4]

Dmitry gave up seafaring in the end, returning to Constantinople, where the job market was overflowing with desperate Russians. Academics worked as waiters; professional musicians busked on the street for pocket change. Dmitry sought out any odd jobs he could find, pretending to be an expert in whichever field, whether it be plastering, cooking or manual labour, until he was found out and fired. In 1922, as Kemal's forces were on the verge of taking over, Dmitry left Constantinople for Czechoslovakia, where he was accepted by the Russian Law Faculty in Prague.[5] There, several hundred Russians who had fled the revolution studied tsarist-era law, with professors who had also arrived as refugees. Most of them believed the Soviet government would soon fall and they would be able to return home.[6]

Dmitry found a part-time job as a gravedigger at a cemetery to help make ends meet. His existence on the poverty line nurtured an anger that pushed him toward Soviet ideology and away from the White émigrés who formed the majority of Prague's Russian community. He read Nietzsche and Lenin as he studied tsarist Russia's defunct legal code. After his months on the high seas, Dmitry was not averse to backing up his political beliefs with his fists: a few days after Lenin died in January 1924, he got into a fight with a monarchist student who wanted to deface the Soviet leader's portrait. The altercation was dramatic enough to be reported in the Prague newspapers.[7]

In April 1925, as head of the small pro-Soviet student union in Prague, Dmitry was invited to Moscow for a conference that gathered three hundred student leaders from across the Soviet Union to discuss how to engage universities in the building of a new society.[8] It was his first taste of Soviet Moscow, and he was enchanted by the mood of revolutionary utopianism in the capital of the new socialist state.[9]

The conference opened in the grand, colonnaded hall of the former Nobles' Assembly, renamed the House of the Soviets, with a minute of silence in memory of Lenin. The delegates, some of whom had travelled for weeks across the vast Soviet landmass, heard a welcome greeting from Stalin. They were then addressed by Anatoly Lunacharsky, the Bolshevik commissar for education, who explained that higher education was populated with reactionary class enemies. 'We must take energetic

and talented young people from the peasantry and proletariat and let them storm the fortresses of knowledge at breakneck speed,' he told the delegates, to prolonged applause.[10]

The student forum was an invigorating experience for Dmitry, but it was not the real purpose of his visit. INO spotters in Prague had flagged him as a potentially promising recruit, and Artur Artuzov, Trilisser's deputy at the INO, wanted to vet him. They met at a former aristocratic mansion, where Dmitry found Artuzov stretched out on a sofa in one of the grand reception rooms. Another INO officer, Mikhail Gorb, sat upright in a chair and eyed Dmitry suspiciously. Their job was to screen promising potential recruits and weed out double agents.

'Let's get to know one another,' said Artuzov, while Gorb glared at Dmitry. 'Don't drag it out too much, but also don't be too brief. I want to know all about your background,' he said.

Dmitry recounted his privileged upbringing in St Petersburg, his adventures at sea, his life in Constantinople and then in Prague. Artuzov was impressed by this loquacious young man, evidently a dedicated Communist but with an aristocratic bearing. 'We can use him in the upper echelons, Misha, among the elites!' he exclaimed to Gorb.[11]

Dmitry was not to become an illegal immediately; instead, he would join the ranks of the INO's legal officers, who were posted abroad posing as diplomats or trade officials. He returned to Prague with the cover job of economic aide at the Soviet trade mission. Secretly, he reported to the INO's 'legal resident' in Prague, Comrade Golst, who posed as a second secretary in the trade mission.[12] Golst took the new recruit under his wing, explaining that Dmitry would work the diplomatic and business circuits in Prague. He needed to make contacts and charm people, scouting for those who might be possible recruits to the Soviet cause. Moscow was also desperate to get its hands on technical and scientific knowledge from the West, and Dmitry's first task was to find the formula for the shoe polish made by Bata, a well-known footwear manufacturer based in Czechoslovakia.

Within a year, Dmitry had dramatically changed his look. Gone was the scruffy sailor turned law student; in his place was a dapper businessman with a tailored suit, suede gloves, and a seducer's smile below a carefully clipped moustache. His ice-blue eyes danced with

mischievous charm, and his hair was oiled into a neat centre parting. He finished the look with a multicoloured scarf, knotted with care to make it appear nonchalant, an elegant flourish that drew glances of appreciation in the bars and restaurants of Prague. It was a remarkable transformation for someone who had spent years on the edge of poverty, though Dmitry insisted that this new lifestyle was purely a requirement of his battle against the enemies of the Soviet Union: ‘I didn’t have even a gulp of alcohol, didn’t smoke a cigarette, and didn’t visit a night joint just for myself. I learned to do it to fight them, and I did it well,’ he later claimed, somewhat implausibly. His bosses in Moscow quickly noticed that he had few qualms about recruitment methods with female sources. ‘He was attractive to women; he got close to them quickly and shared his bed with them,’ read a note on his personal file. The INO bosses decided to put this skill to use.

As the Soviet Union jostled to be taken seriously on the international stage and exploit differences between the major capitalist powers, an insight into the inner thinking of Western governments was crucial for Moscow. Trilisser ordered INO operatives across Europe to prioritise gaining access to the confidential dispatches and ciphers of European diplomatic services. As early as 1924, the INO recruited a messenger working at the British embassy in Rome who provided copies of diplomatic communications and cipher codes to his Soviet handlers in exchange for cash. Secretaries were another potential weak link and often had no less access to secret material than their bosses.

Dmitry and Golst came up with a plan to recruit Marie Aucouturier, a twenty-nine-year-old secretary at the French embassy in Prague. Dmitry made her acquaintance, and the two began an affair. He told her he would soon be posted to the Soviet embassy in Washington. After some time, he proposed, and she eagerly accepted. But not long after, he came to her in devastation, saying his Soviet superiors had vetoed his marriage to a foreigner, unless his fiancée could prove her loyalty to the Soviet cause. He suggested she provide documents, ciphers and codes from the French embassy. Marie was wary of betraying her country, but devoted to her dashing lover, and she eventually produced the information. For two years, Dmitry extorted ever more information from her, explaining every

time that the couple's marriage and departure for Washington had been slightly delayed but was imminent.

During the same period, Dmitry met and fell in love with Iolanta Shelmatova, the daughter of a Czech Communist.[13] He first spotted her handing out Communist flyers in central Prague and was entranced by her delicate features and sad eyes. He struck up a conversation, the pair went on a couple of dates, and they married the same week. In time, he brought Iolanta into his work as an assistant. His French 'fiancée' knew nothing about his new wife, and for several months he alternated between the beds of the two women, who could not have been more different: Iolanta was passionate, volatile and subject to bouts of depression, while Marie was proper, polite and keen to settle down. 'There's no struggle without sacrifice, and all three of us were its victims,' he opined, rather charitably to himself, years later.

When Dmitry's spymasters told him they no longer needed the French cables Marie was supplying, he told her he had been unexpectedly recalled to Moscow. The marriage was off. Shattered by this news, Marie fell to the floor, grabbed Dmitry's ankles, and shrieked in despair. Dmitry looked at her in silence, consumed with self-loathing. He disentangled himself from her grasping arms, turned, and left.

Feeling defiled by the requirements of the job, Dmitry planned to return with Iolanta to Moscow, where he wanted to study economics. His bosses had other ideas. Soviet intelligence was expanding operations in Europe, and Dmitry's skills had not gone unnoticed. Golst, his overseeing officer in Prague, was transferred to Berlin in 1928 and suggested Dmitry join him there. Golst told him it would be a real underground assignment, 'using a different name and a different passport, a deadly dangerous job with no backup or support'. Iolanta begged Dmitry to decline and return to Moscow as they had intended. After a long and sleepless night of discussion, he agreed. But the lure of illegal work proved too intoxicating. When he met with Golst the next day, intending to turn down the offer, Dmitry instead blurted out that he accepted.

When they reunited later in Berlin, Golst told Dmitry he had a tip-off that the Greek consul in Danzig was a shady character who might be induced to issue Dmitry a passport. As an illegal, Dmitry could no longer live on Soviet papers. He travelled to Danzig and at the consulate claimed to be a man named Alexander S. Gallas. He had been born in

Salonika, he explained, but his parents had fled Greece when he was an infant. This was why he did not speak a word of Greek, despite his undimmed love for his birthplace. The ruse worked, and he left Danzig with a new Greek passport. He headed back to Berlin, where he joined the local Orthodox church and made friends with Greek businessmen. He hung his apartment with photographic vistas of Salonika's port. The Centre helped him set up a cloth export business in Berlin, which provided him with both an income and a pretext for travel.

For later illegals, assuming a different identity would often require years of arduous psychological preparation. For Dmitry, it was second nature. His life had already involved numerous transformations of his beliefs as circumstances dictated. He had lived as an aristocrat and a refugee; he had been a bookish student and a manual labourer. He had supported the Whites and then the Reds. He spoke fluent Russian, English, French, Turkish and Czech. And he was still only twenty-eight years old.

Dmitry's new controller would be the illegal resident in Berlin, Boris Bazarov. By 1929, the INO had so-called illegal residents stationed across Europe; the Comintern and Soviet military intelligence also ran their own illegal networks. Some of these operatives were undercover Soviet citizens, while others were foreign-born Communists who worked for Moscow. Bazarov was a Russian who had fought with the White armies in the Civil War, but changed his allegiance in 1921 and offered himself to Soviet intelligence in Berlin. He spent the next years in Vienna and the Balkans running illegal agents before moving back to Berlin in 1927.[14] From there, he oversaw illegal operations in Germany, France and Britain, and one of his main tasks was obtaining economic and diplomatic intelligence about the major European powers.

Bazarov needed Dmitry's help with one particularly tricky source he was currently handling. He explained the backstory: an Englishman had appeared at the Soviet embassy in Paris, wearing a shabby jacket with worn cuffs and looking somewhat nervous. He introduced himself as Charlie Scott and asked in poor French for an audience with the military attaché. The embassy's INO resident received 'Charlie', who announced that he was a typesetter in the British foreign service. He said he was acting for a contact inside the service who wanted to sell secret British

diplomatic documents for cash. Charlie claimed his source might even be willing to sell the cipher codes themselves, which would unlock hundreds of coded British dispatches. His condition was anonymity; he swore that if he ever detected that his new Soviet paymasters were attempting to uncover his real identity, or that of his ultimate source, he would break off contact.

The Centre assigned Bazarov to Charlie, and the Berlin-based illegal made regular trips to Paris to receive bundles of documents from the secretive Englishman and hand over cash in return. Bazarov disguised himself as an Italian Communist by the name of da Vinci for these meetings. Charlie knew he was dealing with the Soviets, but by posing as a Western European, Bazarov reduced the chances that European authorities would flag him as suspicious.[15]

The Centre was delighted with its new source, but over time both the quality and the quantity of the intelligence Charlie provided began to dwindle. Bazarov demanded the identity of Charlie's mole in the Foreign Office so the source might be approached directly. Charlie refused, and the Centre ordered Bazarov to pressure him. If Bazarov could uncover Charlie's identity and blackmail him with exposure, he was likely to fall into line and start sharing high-quality documents again. Bazarov, together with his new colleague Dmitry, began to hatch a plan.[16]

The Centre had provided Dmitry with a newly obtained Czechoslovak passport in the name of József Perelly, a Hungarian born in Bratislava. Perelly, so the story went, was from Hungarian noble lineage, but his family had lost everything during World War I. Down but not out, he moved to Budapest to try to rejuvenate his fortunes. Dmitry took a trip to Budapest to help bring József 'Joe' Perelly to life.[17] He spent several evenings observing the customs of the local elites at receptions in the elegant villas of Buda and inside the lively coffeehouses of Pest. He acquired a collection of books on Hungarian history, literature and art. He ordered suits and hats from local tailors and a set of smoking pipes embossed with what was supposedly the Perelly coat of arms. He had several photographs taken in front of notable landmarks on both sides of the Danube. During a religious procession through the streets of the city centre, he accosted the cardinal of Hungary and asked for a photograph together. When the picture was developed and printed, he tucked it into his passport jacket and was able to claim the cardinal as a distant relative.

It was the perfect cover, and one he would be able to use for many years to come. The one issue was that he had to avoid encountering any real Hungarians, who would quickly rumble him for speaking just a few words of his supposed mother tongue, a fiendishly difficult language that was beyond even Dmitry's formidable linguistic talents.[18]

Ensconced in his new identity, Dmitry travelled to Paris. His dark hair parted straight down the middle and a slender pair of half-moon eyeglasses perched upon the bridge of his nose, he affected the mix of haughtiness and weariness that was the hallmark of the fallen aristocrat, a common sight during the interwar period. One evening, he arrived at a busy restaurant, and a waiter showed him to a table at which Bazarov, in character as the Italian da Vinci, was talking with Charlie, who was wearing his usual brown suit and looked agitated. Both men looked up at him quizzically. Dmitry raised his hand to his forehead with vexation and apologised profusely for intruding on the rendezvous. His own meeting with da Vinci was meant for later that evening, he explained sheepishly, but he had got the time mixed up. Bazarov feigned annoyance, but beckoned to the interloper to join, since he was already here. Dmitry graciously thanked his friend, introduced himself to the Englishman as Joe Perelly, and took a seat.

Anyone observing the restaurant that evening would not have thought there was much unusual about this meeting between three men in their thirties: a heavy-drinking Englishman, a fleshy-lipped Italian with an irritable, hectoring tone, and a down-on-his-luck Hungarian count. The full force of the Wall Street crash of the previous year had not yet made itself felt in Europe, and the decadent atmosphere of *les années folles* was still in the air. Paris drew artists and intellectuals from across Europe, as well as émigrés and adventurers of all nationalities and persuasions.

Over drinks, Bazarov harangued Charlie about the diminishing quality of the documents he was selling. Dmitry listened attentively, throwing the Englishman sympathetic glances. When Bazarov took his leave for a moment, Dmitry launched into a carefully rehearsed diatribe about the unpleasant, aggressive 'Italian', permitting himself to guess that both he and Charlie were in similar circumstances. It was only the devastation to his finances wrought over the past decade that had dragged him into da Vinci's orbit, Dmitry complained. He told Charlie he had been forced to pass over information to this foul-tempered Italian, who, he presumed,

was a Communist working for Moscow, in order to make money to keep up something approaching a civilised lifestyle. Charlie said little, but nodded in agreement.

Dmitry managed to set up another meeting with Charlie, where he again waxed plaintively about the awful bind he was in with da Vinci and said he hoped he could count on Charlie's help. Sensing the Englishman liked a drink, Dmitry plied him with booze, but Charlie was too careful to give much away. When the evening came to a close, Dmitry tailed Charlie through the streets of Paris, but Charlie shook him off. This man was too savvy to be a mere typesetter, Dmitry thought. He was behaving like a disciplined and well-trained intelligence operative. At a subsequent meeting, Charlie finally revealed his address in Paris. When Dmitry went by the next day, he found a demolition site.

Dmitry was as patient and persistent as Charlie was wily, however, and eventually he had a breakthrough, courtesy of a Czech–Latvian couple he had engaged as assistants. While shadowing the elusive Englishman, the pair spotted him entering the Napoleon, an elegant hotel on the Avenue de Friedland, not far from the Arc de Triomphe. They established he was staying on the third floor.

Dmitry visited the hotel and learned that Charlie was registered under the name Ernest Oldwell. But when he travelled to London and looked up Oldwell in the phone directory, he could not find any matches. Back in Paris, the day before he and da Vinci were due to meet Charlie for another document handover, he went to the Napoleon and burst into Charlie's room. He apologised, explaining to the stunned Charlie that he had come because he wanted to change the day of their next meeting, without explaining how he had known where to find him. He took his leave politely; he had already got the information he needed. On Charlie's leather travel bag, lying in the corner of the room, were three embossed letters: E.H.O. Ernest Old-well was an alias, but Dmitry surmised that it must be not far off from his real name. He also guessed that if Charlie was on Foreign Office business, he would likely be heading to the imminent League of Nations meeting in Geneva. Dmitry decided to set off for the conference himself. He arrived by train and visited the Hotel Beau Rivage, where league delegations often stayed. There, he found a list of British delegates and spotted a name that fit: Ernest Holloway Oldham. Dmitry lingered in the lobby for a while, and

soon enough he saw Charlie come in and take a seat at the bar. With an eye for dramatic effect, Dmitry strolled in and took the seat next to Charlie's, without greeting him. When the Englishman turned and saw the man he knew as Joe Perelly sitting next to him, he went deathly pale. Dmitry could see the fear in Ernest Oldham's eyes.

'Our fingers were tightening around his throat,' Dmitry noted cheerfully in his later record of the encounter.[19]

Dmitry reported to Bazarov that he had nailed down Charlie's identity, and the pair – in character as Perelly and da Vinci – travelled to London, where Dmitry planned to pay Ernest Oldham a visit at home. He found Ernest's address in the telephone book – a handsome mansion in upmarket Kensington. Proof, Dmitry thought, that Oldham was of wealthy aristocratic stock. It was a reasonable assumption – the British Foreign Office at that time was an old boy network, with many of its employees knowing each other from private school or Oxbridge – but it was entirely incorrect. Ernest was an anomaly among his colleagues. Until a couple of years prior, he had lived with his parents, who were both schoolteachers, in a terraced house in the working-class suburb of Edmonton. He had been to state school and then entered the Foreign Office as a clerk when he was nineteen, before enlisting to fight at the tail end of World War I. After a stint in hospital for a concussion, Ernest returned to England 'shattered and broken', according to relatives.[20] His humble origins crushed his dream of an international career in the consular service. Instead, he had to make do with a role in the newly formed Communications Department, in charge of encoding messages from London to British missions across the globe. By the mid-1920s, he was overseeing Britain's communications network with Europe and the Middle East, taking frequent trips abroad to check on the routes and logistics used by official messengers. It was an important role, but still regarded as inferior to 'real' diplomatic work.

Ernest's circumstances changed when he met Lucy Wellsted, a Tasmania-born widow twelve years his senior. Ernest and Lucy were not an obvious match, but somehow they hit it off and married in 1927. The annuity Lucy received from her dead husband's will was four times Ernest's salary, which enabled the couple to purchase the mansion in Kensington and acquire other trappings of upper-class life, such as a

maid and a car with a driver. It was a huge financial uplift for Ernest, and he tried hard to fit in with his new social circle. He developed a taste for monogramming his shirts and joined a private members' club. Dmitry, in his observation of Oldham, mistook these aspirational flourishes for aristocratic habit.

Soon after the wedding, it transpired that Lucy's annuity had a mean-spirited condition: if she remarried, she was no longer to receive the payments from her former husband's estate. The couple now had to live on Ernest's modest Foreign Office salary. The altered circumstances strained the relationship, as Ernest took to drink more often and Lucy threatened to leave him. Ernest had a need for cash, and he still felt a burning resentment toward his employers for barring his path to a diplomatic career. It was a potent combination common to many who ended up betraying their countries. Before long, Ernest was walking into the Soviet embassy in Paris to offer his services.[21]

Dmitry arrived at the house in Kensington in a sharp suit, prepared to give Ernest Oldham another nasty shock. Instead, he found himself face to face with Lucy, who seemed irritated by his presence and told him Ernest was away. Lucy was a good-looking woman, he thought as he introduced himself as Joe Perelly, representative of a Dresden bank where her husband had some financial interests. Explaining that the current carnage on the global stock markets was threatening her husband's holdings, he insisted he needed to speak to Ernest immediately. When the talk turned to money, Lucy seemed to grow more interested. Dmitry, sniffing an opportunity to wheedle his way into Ernest's family affairs, rather brazenly asked her to lunch at the Ritz the next day. There, over a pricy bottle of Burgundy, Lucy confided in Dmitry that Ernest was in a rehabilitation clinic for alcoholics in Rendlesham. She suggested he visit him there and try to persuade Ernest to take his treatment seriously. On arrival at the grand yet grim sanatorium, where residents were given chemical purges and strychnine injections, Dmitry found Ernest asleep in an armchair. When Ernest awoke and saw 'Joe Perelly' smiling at him, he must have wondered if the drugs were playing tricks with his mind.

'God damn you,' he murmured through the haze.

Dmitry explained it was imperative for all their sakes that Ernest sober up, get back to work, and start supplying them with a renewed flow of worthwhile material. He returned to London, and when he arrived at the Kensington house to report on Ernest's progress to Lucy, she beckoned him inside warmly. He had barely had time to sip the drink she poured him when the situation escalated. Bazarov, in his report back to the Centre, described the alleged scene: 'With the spirited gesture of a port-town girl, she hoisted up her dress, opened her legs and begged him not to waste any time.'[22] Dmitry, when he told the story years later, claimed he was flushed with sweat and shame after the act, locking himself in the bathroom, staring at himself in the mirror in disgust, and wondering what on earth he had done. Both his surprise and his horror seem a little forced; he had, after all, played the charming foreign cad enthusiastically with Lucy from their first meeting.

Dmitry now had Ernest in his pocket and Lucy in his bed. Once Ernest came out of rehab and went back to work, Dmitry withdrew from London, occasionally meeting with Ernest in cities across Europe to exchange packages of documents for cash. He arranged for a son of Lucy's from her first marriage to board with a wealthy family in Germany, giving the couple a pretext for frequent trips to Berlin, where they could hand over packages. The documents sent by Oldham filled twenty-six fat files in the Moscow Centre archives and covered much of the secret European diplomacy of the time, amid the economic hit of the Depression and Adolf Hitler's rise to power in Germany. For the Soviet Union, which was still not part of the League of Nations, Ernest's files provided vital intelligence about European politics and the calculations Britain was making behind closed doors.

In November 1932, the INO awarded Dmitry a pistol in recognition of his successful work. It was inscribed with a tribute to his 'merciless battle with the counterrevolution'.

In Joe Perelly, Ernest Oldham saw a nobleman who had fallen on hard times, just as Dmitry and Bazarov had devised. He appeared genuinely eager to help his new friend, and even managed to procure Dmitry yet another identity in mid-1932. In a sign of how lax Foreign Office security was at the time, Ernest simply asked his colleagues for a passport for his 'friend' Robert Grenville, a British aristocrat living in Canada. The

passport was signed and stamped in the office, no questions asked. Dmitry gained a prized British passport for his collection.[23]

The spectre of alcohol continued to loom over Ernest, and colleagues increasingly found him drunk or asleep on the job. Often he did not show up at work at all. It was not easy to get fired from the Foreign Office in the 1930s, but Ernest managed it. Noting his odd countenance, a few of his colleagues voiced suspicions that he might be removing confidential materials from the office. He was suspended, without the right to a pension. In a telegram to the Centre, Dmitry described Ernest's state following this development as 'complete apathy, heavy vomiting and the inability to speak or move'.[24] He worried Ernest might blurt out the truth if questioned. The sensible move would be to break off all contact. On the other hand, if he could find out the name of Ernest's master source, he could establish a direct relationship and keep receiving much-needed intelligence for Moscow. He hatched a plan to offer Ernest a lifetime pension in exchange for connecting him directly with the source.

In December 1932, Dmitry set out for London again. On Christmas Day, he found Ernest dishevelled and asleep in an armchair at the Kensington house. 'Go away, you bitch,' Ernest muttered when Dmitry shook him awake, thinking he was speaking to his wife. Between them, Lucy and Dmitry arranged to transport the semi-conscious patient back to the Rendlesham clinic. Dmitry noticed bruises on Lucy's throat where her husband had tried to throttle her. 'I spent three days persuading her not to commit suicide while she lay sedated in bed,' he wrote in his report.[25] He was simultaneously tormentor and counsellor.

In May 1933, Ernest unexpectedly appeared in Paris in better shape and with a new bundle of documents for his handlers in a sealed Foreign Office package. He told Dmitry he had already paid his source for the sealed package and now needed reimbursing. Dmitry paid up. Hitler had come to power in Germany two months prior, and the stakes of international diplomacy were higher than ever. The Soviets were grateful for any insight into British diplomatic thinking. A month later, Lucy and Ernest arrived in Paris again, without a package but still begging for cash. Dmitry followed them back to London, but within a day of his arrival he had to intervene to stop Ernest from attacking his wife in a drunken rage.

Dmitry heard from Lucy that a former colleague of Ernest's, Thomas Kemp, had been paying her visits and asking questions about Ernest's contacts. There were two possibilities: Either Kemp was investigating Ernest for suspected espionage, in which case Dmitry was in trouble, or Kemp was Ernest's ultimate source and could be approached directly to keep the documents flowing. The Centre instructed Dmitry to find out which it was. Bazarov messaged back to the Centre that it was possible that Dmitry would be 'liquidated by the enemy' during this final stage of the mission, but decided this was a risk worth taking. 'For him to depart now would mean the loss of a source of such importance that it would weaken our defense and increase the power of the enemy,' he wrote to Moscow.

Not taking any chances, Bazarov told Dmitry he should try to arrange a meeting with Kemp and should take two items with him – his Greek passport, should he need to make a quick escape, and a gun. If apprehended, Dmitry was to shoot himself. A courier would meet him by the Serpentine Lake in Hyde Park to hand off these items, said Bazarov. Dmitry arrived at the spot and waited. Soon after, he was surprised to see a familiar face materialise among the crowds in the park – Iolanta, his wife.

Dmitry's marriage was fraught with difficulties caused by separation, infidelity and the toll of illegal work, a potent cocktail that would bedevil the married lives of many illegals over subsequent decades. Their first year together was reasonably happy, despite Dmitry's ongoing affair with the secretary at the French embassy, but soon after, Iolanta began suffering from acute depression. She visited a Prague psychiatrist, who identified borderline personality disorder and 'diagnosed' her as bisexual. The psychiatrist recommended immediate hospitalisation and suggested the condition was grounds for divorce.[26] Dmitry declined, even when it became apparent she had been having her own affairs. Perhaps, knowing what an imperfect husband he had been, it assuaged his guilt a little to know she was also betraying him.

Had Dmitry and Iolanta returned to Moscow in 1930, they might have been able to build a happier relationship. When he instead moved to Berlin as an illegal, the couple had to separate; there was no room for a Czech wife in Dmitry's new Greek and Hungarian identities. Iolanta took

a job as a courier for Soviet intelligence; some months later, she was arrested when crossing the Austrian border and jailed. She was released in 1932 on compassionate grounds due to severe tuberculosis and checked into a sanatorium in Davos, Switzerland, from where she served as a logistics point for illegals transiting Europe.

Now, in much better health, she stood before Dmitry in Hyde Park. She handed him the small package containing his gun and passport, and the pair embraced tightly. After bidding his wife farewell, Dmitry walked across Hyde Park and Kensington Gardens and knocked on the door of the Oldham residence. Ernest was still recovering in the clinic, but Lucy was home. Dmitry told her he wanted to meet the mysterious Kemp, and Lucy agreed to invite him over. By this time, British authorities had become suspicious enough to place a tap on the Kensington phone, which picked up the call.

'Who do you think is over here?' Lucy asked Kemp. 'Joe Perelly! And he wants to see you. So can you come to lunch at 1.30 p.m. at my place?'

Kemp agreed immediately.[27]

At lunch, it quickly became clear that Kemp was not the source. 'By now, we have little doubt that there is a foreign spy somewhere around Ernest,' he announced gravely at the table, adding that he had been tasked by his bosses with smoking the scoundrel out. There was of course one foreigner who was frequently to be found in Ernest Oldham's company, a certain Joe Perelly, the suavely dressed and smooth-tongued trustee of a Dresden bank. Dmitry shifted awkwardly in his chair. Yet it seemed the Foreign Office had few clues as to the identity of the spy, and the thought that the man might be seated opposite him had apparently not crossed Kemp's mind.

Dmitry spoke quickly, to pre-empt any such thought from occurring to the Englishman. He told Kemp he had a few leads on the possible identity of Ernest's mysterious spymaster. 'I'll risk disclosing some family secrets, although, as the trustee of a well-respected bank, I'm forbidden from doing so,' he murmured conspiratorially. He suggested they could meet the next day at the Ritz for lunch, to discuss the matter away from the ears of Lucy. Kemp, doubtless excited by the dual prospect of cracking the case and being fed for free at the Ritz, thanked the Hungarian banker profusely for his kind offer. It is hard to know

whether to emphasise Kemp's dim-wittedness or Dmitry's hypnotic charm in this remarkable lunchtime exchange. Presumably both played a role.[28]

The next day, Kemp arrived at the Ritz at the appointed hour, to find no sign of Joe Perelly or a booking in his name. After waiting a while, he walked to the hotel where Perelly had mentioned he was staying, but found no trace of him there either. Finally, Kemp began to worry. He headed back to his office to raise the alarm. British authorities checked the registration logs of air and sea ports, but could find no records of a József Perelly arriving in or departing Britain. The Hungarian count had vanished into thin air. It went unnoticed that a man who looked very much like Perelly, but whose passport identified him as the Greek merchant Alexander S. Gallas, had taken a flight out of London early that morning.

The Centre sent Dmitry a message praising his 'self-sacrifice, discipline, resourcefulness and courage' in carrying out his mission and avoiding bloody retribution from the British assassins they were convinced were on his tail. Meanwhile, the actual Foreign Office response continued to be marked by inaction and incompetence. Even though they knew they were dealing with a volatile alcoholic who might have been handing state secrets over to a foreign power for years, they did not even confiscate Ernest's passport. He somehow sobered up enough to board a plane to Switzerland, where he met with Dmitry and Bazarov and begged them to pay him. The two illegals, thoroughly sick of their alcoholic quarry by now, but still hopeful they might finally uncover the name of his source, resumed their familiar double act. Dmitry spoke soft words of encouragement, while Bazarov threatened him with betrayal to the British authorities. All Ernest needed to do was to give up his source. With inexplicable stubbornness for a man who seemed utterly desperate, Ernest refused to do so.

The reason for Ernest's fortitude was simple: there was no source, and Ernest had been pilfering files from the Foreign Office all by himself. To be fair to Dmitry, it stretched credulity that security at the Foreign Office could be lax enough to allow a patently unstable employee to continue stealing documents after his dismissal. But nobody stopped Ernest from wandering back into the office. He even kept his own safe-deposit box on

the premises. Over time, the guards noticed that during nocturnal visits to his old office Ernest was bathed in perspiration.[29] The final straw only came when he was caught trying to take wax impressions of keys to the safes in the coding rooms. The Foreign Office finally started to take the matter seriously and called in MI5 to keep an eye on Ernest.

Having lost his job, his marriage, and his only remaining source of income, the miserable Ernest checked into the Jules Hotel on Jermyn Street and spent the evenings buying drinks with his remaining money. Two watchers got chatting with him in the hotel bar and fed him enough booze to send him to sleep, allowing them to search his room. The depressing inventory of Ernest's possessions is preserved in his MI5 file: a box of liver pills, a packet of cigarettes, five and a half pence, some dirty clothes, six empty bottles of gin, a used plane ticket to Switzerland, and a notebook listing a number of foreign addresses including one for a Mr J.P., poste restante, in the French town of Trouville.[30] This, presumably, was the mysterious banker Joe Perelly, on whom investigators were finally homing in as a likely suspect. But it was much too late. Joe Perelly was never coming back to Britain.

As MI5 and the Foreign Office wondered how best to proceed without causing unwanted public embarrassment, Ernest took the decision out of their hands. On 25 September, he received a letter with a Geneva postmark. The receptionist at the Jules Hotel later told police that Ernest became upset when he read the message.[31] Was it notice from Joe Perelly that their financial relations were over? Or was it yet more blackmail?

Three days after receiving the mysterious letter, Ernest disappeared from the hotel and went back to his house in Kensington, now empty after Lucy had moved out. He removed his clothes and put on a dressing gown. Then he sealed the kitchen doors and windows, turned on the gas cooker, and lay down on the floor.[32]

After Ernest's death, British attempts to find out more about Joe Perelly did not yield much. Kemp, when questioned, said only that he thought Perelly was a 'Jew from Vienna'. He kept quiet about the lunch he was supposed to have with Perelly at the Ritz, presumably out of embarrassment. In the Foreign Office, a working assumption developed that Ernest Oldham was passing secrets to Germany. According to the

surviving records, nobody at the time suspected Moscow of any involvement in the Oldham case.[33] This showed the effectiveness of using illegals rebadged as foreigners, but it was also a testament to the fact that for three years Dmitry had played his hand with skill and cunning. Even Lucy was fully convinced by his Hungarian identity, and she remained loyal to the man she knew as Joe Perelly, who she felt had shown tender affection for her and done his best for Ernest. She told British authorities that she had no idea how to contact Joe, but secretly she wrote to him at an agreed address and kept him up to date on the progress of the investigation in exchange for payment.

'The effort expended on her has paid off,' Dmitry reported drily back to the Centre.[34]

Dmitry never set foot on British soil again, but he soon recruited a new British source to replace Oldham, using a proxy. He coached a Dutch painter named Hans Pieck in the art of recruitment; Pieck then approached John Herbert King, a disgruntled cipher clerk at the Foreign Office, and offered to paint his portrait. Pieck later told King he worked for a Dutch banker who would pay handsomely to get advance notice of trade deals on the continent. The first batch of documents King delivered included notes on various official telegrams and a detailed account of a meeting between the foreign secretary, Sir John Simon, and Adolf Hitler.[35] Britain had learned little from the Oldham debacle.

The Soviets were far ahead of their adversaries when it came to espionage. Britain's Secret Intelligence Service by now had overseas stations, with numerous agents working under diplomatic cover as passport control officers, but their work was limited in scope. In 1936, the British ambassador to Moscow refused to open an MI6 station in the embassy there for fear it could 'cause embarrassment'. The American embassy in Moscow, which finally opened in 1933, also housed no spies, because the United States did not yet have a dedicated foreign intelligence service. Meanwhile, Moscow's illegals roamed Europe at will. An antiquarian bookseller in The Hague, a fishmonger in Paris, and an American businessman criss-crossing the continent were just a few of their many cover occupations. Most were men, although there are mentions of a few female illegals in archives too. Anna Razumova, an illegal attached to the Comintern, spent six years living in a series of

French and Swiss identities working with the leadership of the French Communist Party, managing its connection with Communist groups in the French colonies.[36]

In his memoirs, Dmitry described many other missions across Europe during the 1930s. In Nazi Germany, he acquired top-secret Wehrmacht procurement documents by seducing a secretary in charge of guarding them, whom he described as a 'bloodthirsty dog' with a grotesque appearance. Between European missions, he took long trips to Africa, where he lived among Tuareg tribes and travelled through the Belgian Congo. He went to gain intelligence on the mood in the European colonies for his bosses in Moscow and to disappear from Western Europe when he feared he might be exposed. He used various guises to win trust or slip through border checks: in addition to Perelly, he still had the Greek passport of Alexander S. Gallas and a Dutch document in the name of Hans Galleni. At other times he took on the guise of a Yugoslav butcher, a jaundiced English lord, or a Norwegian herring salesman. He sometimes had little more than an afternoon to get into a new character, but he knew it was dangerous to cut corners. 'If you pose as a herring salesman, you should be able to tell one herring from another – a Norwegian herring, a bloater. You should learn how a herring salesman moves and talks. You should reek of herring,' he later recalled.[37]

The evidence available shows that most of the missions Dmitry wrote about really did take place, but while the Oldham saga is well supported by other sources, verifying the details of these later missions is close to impossible.[38] Dmitry's own accounts of his adventures are thoroughly unreliable, first because he wrote them hoping they might one day be published in the Soviet Union, and thus amended or excised certain details that could prove ideologically problematic. Additionally, he was an incorrigible fabulist. Even though the bare, verifiable facts of his biography sketch out one of the most extraordinary lives of the twentieth century, his stories are nevertheless filled with a procession of almost impossible coincidences and close shaves, each one stretching credibility more than the previous. A life of lying perhaps makes telling the truth an impossible feat.

The sections of Dmitry's writings that feel most genuine are those where he describes how the cheating and lying gnawed at his conscience.

‘Working in intelligence not only disfigures your life and soul; it does the same to strangers who are forced to become involved in it,’ he wrote wistfully.[39] Added to this was the everyday tension of a life lived in the knowledge that at any moment a tiny slip could spell failure or even death. The constant hum of anxiety ate away at him. In 1936, he wrote an impassioned plea to the new legal resident in Berlin, asking that he be allowed to return to Moscow: ‘I am working on cases of huge importance and hold the fate of several people in my hands, and at the same time I am beset by exhaustion and periods of depression. I am working through nervous energy and forced willpower alone. I no longer have any joy in successes or love for the work; I just have the recurring thought that it would be good to go to bed at night and never wake up again.’

In September 1936, the Centre gave him permission to return to Moscow. He envisioned embarking on a more relaxing life of painting and writing and the chance to save his marriage. It was destined to be a forlorn hope.

4

The Terror:

Stalin's Purges

The Soviet Union to which Dmitry returned was unrecognisable from the place he had visited in 1925. Stalin had launched a push to industrialise the country at breakneck speed and paired this with the brutal collectivisation of agriculture, which led to millions of deaths by starvation and the forced resettlement of millions of so-called rich peasants.[1] For others, the regime offered dizzying levels of social mobility as it aimed to promote those with proletarian or peasant backgrounds. Moscow, the Soviet capital, was 'the cauldron in which a new life is being created', as the novelist Mikhail Bulgakov put it.[2] During Dmitry's time abroad, black sedans had gradually replaced the old pony traps in the central streets, many of which had been renamed after leading Bolsheviks or foreign Marxists. The roomy apartments of the pre-revolutionary merchant class had been divided up into so-called *kommunalki*, housing new arrivals from the countryside, one family to a room. In 1931, the gold-domed Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, which had dominated the Moscow skyline since 1883, was blown up using seven tons of explosives. Hundreds of smaller churches were also destroyed as part of the government's atheism drive.[3] A new ten-year General Plan, launched in 1935, broadened central roads and gave the city an even more monumental feel. The same year, the first line of the city's metro system opened. Deep underground and filled with grand socialist realist sculptures and mosaics, the stations were subterranean cathedrals of the new Soviet reality. The metro was the fastest and busiest in the world, according to a massive Soviet propaganda drive, and represented nothing less than 'a majestic school in the formation of the new man'.[4]

Stalin was close to amassing the level of power and adulation the tsars had once enjoyed. Already, there was no one in the government who dared criticise him publicly, and his portraits adorned buildings and public spaces across the country. Trotsky, his biggest rival for the mantle of Lenin's heir, had been forced into exile in 1929. But Stalin was far from relaxed in his position. He feared that the elite was packed with Trotskyite enemies who were applauding him in public but keen to stab him in the back if given the chance. Ever since the Civil War, there had been frequent purges of party and government organs, expelling those deemed ideologically unreliable from their posts. As the 1930s went on, the mood darkened further. At the Seventeenth Congress of the Bolshevik Party in 1934, the plenary sessions saw Stalin lauded with endless rounds of applause and toadying speeches. But when there was a secret ballot to confirm his role as general secretary, three hundred votes, nearly a quarter of those present, went against him. Stalin took it as proof of a secret conspiracy.

In August 1936, Grigory Zinoviev and Lev Kamenev, who together with Stalin had formed a ruling triumvirate around the time of Lenin's death, were among sixteen people put on trial. They were accused of being part of a plot to kill Stalin and undermine the Soviet Union. At the trial, Kamenev confessed, implausibly, that he had used all manner of nefarious means, including 'illegal appeals, illegal presses … conspiracy and finally, terror', to achieve his goals on behalf of his allies, Trotsky and fascist Germany.[5] All sixteen defendants were found guilty and shot in the basement of Lubyanka. The Bolsheviks had perfected the art of the illegal, undercover agents who hid their true ideology and goals for years on end. Now Stalin saw enemy illegals everywhere, operating as stealthily inside the Soviet Union as Dmitry had done in London.

On arrival back in Moscow, Dmitry reported to Abram Slutsky, the new head of foreign intelligence at the NKVD. Slutsky gave short shrift to Dmitry's plan to quit the service, explaining that his impressive linguistic talents were required in the translation department. A few months later, in March 1937, Slutsky told Dmitry he was to be dispatched to another foreign posting, this time together with his wife, Iolanta. They would pose as John and Aili Wento, a Canadian couple working in the timber industry. The pair travelled to Karelia, near the Soviet border with

Finland, where they took photographs in the forests to bolster their new cover story. Before they were due to depart for their mission, in March 1937, Slutsky took Dmitry to meet Nikolai Yezhov, who had recently been appointed head of the NKVD, as the security service was now called. By turns unctuous and vindictive, Yezhov was under five feet tall, with shiny black hair, pale skin and thin, veiny hands. He would later be nicknamed the Bloody Dwarf for his role in directing Stalin's purges. Yezhov wished Dmitry good luck and kissed him three times on the cheeks. 'Stalin and the Motherland won't forget you,' were his parting words.[6]

By this time, Yezhov's NKVD was already making mass arrests. Men and women who had been loyal Bolsheviks for decades were accused of secretly working as foreign spies. Dmitry watched as his former and current colleagues were arrested. Mikhail Gorb and Artur Artuzov, the two men who had interviewed him in Moscow in 1925 and agreed on his induction into the service, were both arrested in the spring of 1937. They faced the accusation of being part of a counter-revolutionary terrorist group, and after some months of interrogation they were put on a list of thirty-eight people recommended for execution. On the first page, in thick red pencil, Stalin scrawled the word *Za* (in favour).[7] All of them were shot on the same day, 21 August 1937.

The feverish climate continued to intensify as more previously unimpeachable comrades were unmasked as supposed fascists and enemy spies. The illegals, with their long years of work abroad and malleable, cosmopolitan identities, were easy targets. Boris Bazarov, who had worked with Dmitry in Berlin, was recalled to Moscow in 1938 for what he thought was a well-earned vacation. Instead, he was arrested on arrival and accused of working for French and German intelligence. He was later shot.[8]

Dmitry watched his former bosses, colleagues and co-conspirators fall one after another. He struggled to comprehend this shocking turn of events, as did many loyal Soviet citizens. Nobody could be trusted: not colleagues, not friends, sometimes not even wives or husbands. The mood was captured in the film *Party Card.* For the first hour, the film is a frothy factory-based romance about Pavel Kuganov, a charismatic new arrival in Moscow who becomes a model labourer and wins the heart of Anna, a devoted party member. But Kuganov is really an embittered

enemy, using a false identity, who has travelled to Moscow to wreck the Soviet economy on the orders of a secret underground opposition centre. The film ends with Anna holding her lover at gunpoint before he is arrested and marched away.

This disturbing vision found its reflection in Soviet reality. Osip Pyatnitsky, a pre-revolutionary Bolshevik illegal who had sat on the Comintern's Commission on Illegal Work, had for years been lauded as a model of dedication to the Bolshevik cause. In July 1937, he was arrested and accused of being one of the leaders of a 'fascist espionage organisation of Trotskyites and Rightists'. His wife, Yulia, was tormented by a gnawing sense of uncertainty. 'Who is Pyatnitsky? A true revolutionary or a scoundrel? Either could be true. I do not know. That is the most agonizing thing,' she wrote in her diary. After all, he had spent years advising Comintern illegals on the best way to hide their true identities and allegiances. Maybe he had been doing the same thing himself.[9]

'Wake up, my love,' Iolanta whispered urgently into Dmitry's ear as she shook him out of sleep in the early hours of 18 September 1938. 'They're here.'

Dmitry came to his senses to see his wife's terrified eyes blinking at him, her face deathly pale. Beyond, two men in leather caps and long buttonless raincoats leered at him from over the end of his bed.

'Where's your weapon?' they shouted in unison. Dmitry signalled to the bookshelf where his service pistol was laid out in its holster. One of the men grabbed the gun and slipped it into his pocket.

'Get out of bed and get dressed! Quickly!'

While Dmitry pulled on his clothes, the men ransacked his wardrobe, stacked with well-tailored garments from his various foreign adventures. They scooped cufflinks out of drawers and pulled down an elegant winter coat from a hook by the front door, tossing all the loot into a growing pile of possessions for confiscation in the corner of the room. The accoutrements of a decade of high life and seduction across Western Europe must have seemed unimaginably luxurious to the men arresting Dmitry in the weakly lit apartment on that gloomy Moscow night.

'Here's the search and arrest warrant. Sign it,' snarled one of the men. Dmitry signed without protesting or even reading the paper.

Dmitry's apartment block mainly housed intelligence officers, and almost every night someone was arrested. Dmitry and his wife lived on the ground floor, and they had slept poorly for months, woken by the growl of the NKVD's black cars come to cart off one or another resident. Iolanta had packed a small bundle for Dmitry: warm clothes, a bowl and spoon, and a few food items. It had sat by the door, ready to go, for months. Now, finally, his time had come. Along with fear of what lay ahead, Dmitry felt a wave of relief. At least the nerve-shredding wait was over.

As the first pinkish rays of dawn appeared in the sky outside, the men told Dmitry it was time to go. Iolanta pulled the shawl from her head and tied it around his neck, imploring him to keep it close so she would stay in his memory. Then he felt two strong hands shoving him in his back, pushing him toward the door.[10]

After a night in Lubyanka, Dmitry was transferred to Butyrka prison, where he was placed in a large cell with a motley crew that included factory directors, engineers and even the celebrated Andrei Tupolev, who had designed some of the most advanced planes in the world before his arrest in 1937. He listened to the miserable tales of his cellmates, many of whom also spoke convincingly of their innocence. Slowly, it began to dawn on Dmitry that the situation was graver than he had believed. Three months into his incarceration in Butyrka, guards woke him and drove him across town to Lubyanka, where in an interrogation room he was given an ultimatum by an NKVD investigator.

'In the coming days you will begin to give us the testimony we need. I called you here to work out what you'd like to write it in. Ink, or blood?'

Dmitry felt it would be a weak showing to fall at the first hurdle, and he refused to start talking. He was subsequently moved to another Moscow prison, Lefortovo. One night, two heavyset guards roused him, pulled his hands behind his back, and pushed his face down toward the floor. They dragged him between them as they ran quickly along an iron balcony and downstairs to a basement room. They pushed him onto a chair in front of an investigator named Solovyov. Glancing up at his angry, glaring eyes, Dmitry thought Solovyov resembled an oversized toad.

'You know the charges, you fascist scum? You're a conspirator, a spy, a diversionary, a terrorist! Are you going to write all this testimony

down?’

‘No,’ said Dmitry quietly.

‘I thought not,’ said Solovyov. He stood up, walked toward Dmitry, and punched him hard in the face, several times. Dmitry lost several teeth, spitting them out together with mouthfuls of blood. After stamping hard on Dmitry’s toes, Solovyov turned away, and told the two guards to get to work. They shined bright lights in his face, tossed him against the wall, and broke his breastbone. The sharp pains slowly morphed into a general dull ache across his whole body, and he drifted in and out of consciousness.

‘Are you ready to write?’ asked Solovyov after what seemed like an eternity.

Dmitry wanted to say no, but he could not form the words. The guards dragged him back up to his cell.

The beatings continued regularly, with ever more inventive and gruesome methods. Eventually, Solovyov returned and told Dmitry the bosses wanted a confession quickly, and it was time to raise the stakes. He brandished a hammer, the head wrapped in cotton, and tonked Dmitry on the head with it. He whipped him with a rope that had ball bearings attached. Dmitry began to feel his life slipping away from him. Defeated, he whispered through his swollen, bloody lips that he was ready to give whatever testimony was required.

After a week spent recovering from his injuries, Dmitry was brought to Solovyov again. This time, the atmosphere was different. Solovyov offered Dmitry sandwiches and sweet, hot tea. With frequent prompting, Dmitry recounted how his entire career had been a brilliant undercover operation carried out on behalf of the Soviet Union’s enemies. Once Solovyov had finished writing, Dmitry had to check the pages for accuracy and sign them. It was a curious feature of the purges that for all their grotesque lawlessness there was an obsession with formal paper trails to retain the appearance of due process.

On occasion, Dmitry could see the toll the long sessions were taking on his tormentor. Solovyov looked harassed and exhausted; like most of the interrogators, he worked through the night and slept during the day. Many drank heavily to cope with the work and were tormented by nightmares when they did manage to grab a few hours of sleep. During one of their now-friendly sessions, as Dmitry spoke of his foreign

passports and the large amounts of cash he had handled when posted abroad, a strange look came over Solovyov's face as something dawned on him for the first time.

'You mean to say that any time you liked, you could have just run off somewhere with all the cash, and lived in luxury to the end of your days?'

'Yes, I could have done that.'

'And … you still came back here?'

'I came back to my homeland,' said Dmitry, glancing up to look Solovyov in the eye.

The NKVD man grabbed at his hair in frustrated confusion.

'You swapped foreign currency for a Soviet bullet? You had it all, and you dragged yourself back here? Moron! You utter moron! You have no soul and no brain.'

The interlude was a rare glimpse backstage in the theatre of the purges. As the exhausted Solovyov kept muttering swearwords, for the first time Dmitry saw in his tormentor a human being, and perhaps one who was also in some way a victim of the gruesome system.[11]

Staying abroad might not have saved Dmitry. Ignaty Reiss, an illegal who worked in Europe during the 1930s, sometimes posing as an American businessman, was so horrified by the news he read coming out of the Soviet Union that he quit in the summer of 1937 and wrote an open letter to French newspapers denouncing Stalin's policies as a betrayal of socialism. It took just six weeks for a team of fellow illegals to locate his hiding place in a Swiss village and lure him into a trap, disguised as a friendly meeting with like-minded comrades. His body was found riddled with bullets, dumped at the side of the road just outside Lausanne.[12] Other illegals who decided to stay in the West met similar fates.

There was no mercy, either, for the INO bosses, who were liquidated in the same way as high-ranking officials in almost every Soviet government department and institution. In February 1938, the head of the INO, Slutsky, was chloroformed in his office at Lubyanka and then injected with poison. Officially, it was announced he had died of a heart attack.[13] He was replaced by Sergei Shpigelglas, an experienced illegal who had operated under the cover identity Ernst Deutschlander in Paris,

where he ran his illegal residency from a fishmonger's.[14] He lasted just three months as the head of the INO. His successor, Zelman Passov, managed five months. Both were arrested and shot as enemy spies.

As 1938 went on, it seemed Meer Trilisser, the wily old Bolshevik who had run the INO throughout the 1920s, might be one of the few high-ranking intelligence figures to survive the purges. In the mid-1930s, he had been put in charge of rooting out subversive elements in the Comintern. He oversaw the arrests of leading members of the German and Polish Communist parties who were in exile in Moscow.[15] As the purges continued, he cheered from the sidelines, calling for vigilance and ruthlessness in the fight against capitalist spies. But in November 1938, just as the bloodshed was winding down, he too was arrested.

He did not confess until August of the next year, and his court file shows that the prisoner asked to delay his confession 'until he could remember all the facts of his enemy activity'. The coy phrasing strongly suggests that, as with Dmitry, it had taken months of torture to break Trilisser. Eventually, he confessed. A forty-three-page typed interrogation transcript, each page signed by Trilisser to attest to its accuracy, recorded his admission that for the whole period that he ran the INO, he was secretly working as a British spy.[16]

Trilisser had been a loyal servant of the Bolshevik cause since 1901. He had spent several years locked away in a tsarist prison and several more in icy Siberian exile. After the revolution, he had built the INO from scratch into a formidable intelligence service. Now he sat awaiting execution in a dark and lonely prison cell, after 'admitting' to the absurd charge that the brilliant network of spies he had put in place was designed not to benefit the Soviet Union but to destroy it.

For decades, historians have tried to make sense of what came to be called the Great Terror, one of the twentieth century's most puzzling crimes. More than 680,000 people were shot as enemies of the state during a two-year period, including many of the oldest and most respected Bolsheviks and the majority of the leadership of most government institutions.

Several reasons coalesced in 1937 to make the purges possible. The geopolitical backdrop was important: a major war looked increasingly likely, due to the expansionist designs of both Hitler's Germany and

imperial Japan, and Stalin wanted to make sure his country faced this potential war united. Domestically, although there was never a giant conspiracy combining Trotskyite elements and imperialist secret services, there was some opposition among the Bolshevik elite to the sweeping and violent changes Stalin had made to Soviet society. There was also a more cynical calculation at play. The bloodshed eliminated almost all the 'old Bolsheviks', men like Trilisser who had been in the party since before the revolution and who could thus claim a legitimacy that did not derive directly from Stalin's favour. They would be replaced with younger, loyal yes-men.

There is, however, one more element of the Bolshevik mindset that is crucial for understanding how the Great Terror could happen. This was the party's long-standing adherence to *konspiratsiya* and the history of long-term, deep-undercover missions. The Bolsheviks had perfected the art of the illegal, men and women who looked and behaved like model capitalists while secretly working for Moscow. Stalin assumed that such overarching conspiracies would surely also be employed by the Soviet Union's enemies.[17] He certainly knew some of his victims were innocent of the charges against them, but it seems he genuinely believed many were not. He saw enemy illegals everywhere, plotting to bring down the Soviet Union even as they pretended to serve it, operating as stealthily inside the Soviet Union as Dmitry had done when he played the role of Joe Perelly in London. Seen through the eyes of a regime that trained illegals to spend years hiding their real allegiances and intentions, the idea that the Soviet elite was riddled with similar turncoats morphed from paranoid fantasy to plausible concern.

The months that Dmitry refused to admit his guilt probably saved his life. Toward the end of 1938, Stalin dismissed Yezhov, and the mass arrests began to wind down. Yezhov, who had fabricated so many accusations, was soon arrested and himself accused of being a foreign agent: of Poland, Germany, Britain and Japan all at once. It was a fitting end to the madness.

Dmitry's day in court did not come around until 8 May 1939, a month after Yezhov's arrest. The one-page verdict of his perfunctory trial laid out his long career in the service of Czech intelligence. He had been recruited in Prague in the 1920s, the court claimed, and when he returned

from his foreign postings to Moscow in 1936, Dmitry continued working for the Czechs as their ‘illegal resident in Moscow’, sending secret information back to Prague.[18] Essentially, the accusation went, Dmitry Bystrolyotov had been a double illegal: a Western agent posing as a Soviet agent posing as a Westerner. In the relatively lenient atmosphere of 1939, he was spared the death sentence received by so many of his former colleagues and bosses, and sentenced to twenty years of hard labour. When he was eventually released, in 1954, he emerged disillusioned and broken, a very different person from the twinkle-eyed illegal who for a decade had seduced women and fooled men across Europe.

For decades to come, the Centre would try to recapture the vision and ambition of Dmitry Bystrolyotov and the other Great Illegals. But Soviet intelligence would never fully recover from the destructive impulse of the Stalinist system to punish its brightest servants.

PART TWO

War and Cold War

5

Inroads to America:

The First Illegals in the United States

One morning late in 1937, a letter arrived for Michael Straight at his mother's grand apartment at 1172 Park Avenue, on Manhattan's Upper East Side. 'Dear friend, I have just arrived and would like to see you next week. Yours, Anthony.' A few days later, his phone rang, and the caller identified himself as 'Anthony's friend'.

Straight, who had just turned twenty-one, was the son of Dorothy Whitney, one of the richest women in America and the co-founder of the *New Republic.* He had recently arrived back in the United States from Cambridge, where he had studied economics with John Maynard Keynes, had been elected president of the Cambridge Union, and was noticed by Anthony Blunt, an art history professor who doubled as a talent spotter for Soviet intelligence, identifying left-wing students who might go on to have promising establishment careers and be useful to Moscow.

Blunt latched onto Straight's leftist sympathies and told the young American he should return home, cut ties with all his left-wing associates, and tell his friends and family he had given up on his previous Communist views. Straight did as instructed, launching passionate tirades against 'the Reds' to anyone who would listen and dismissing his former views as youthful folly. He began cleaning his nails and slicking his hair back with brilliantine, touches he felt ought to count as evidence of his newfound seriousness. A few months later, the letter arrived, followed by the phone call. The man on the line said he would be waiting in a nearby restaurant.

When Straight arrived at the location, he spotted a dark-haired man in his mid-thirties, wearing a brown suit and sitting alone at a table for two, his eyes fixed on the entrance. The man nodded in acknowledgement and stood in welcome as Straight approached, holding out a hand.

‘My name is Michael, the same as yours,’ the man said, offering a warm smile as the pair shook hands. ‘Michael Green.’ A waitress approached and Straight declined food, but Green had already ordered. The food arrived and he tucked in.

Green apologised for arriving without the document that he was meant to bring to prove his bona fides – a note written by Straight and left with Blunt in Cambridge, with the promise that whoever made contact in future would present it. This made Straight nervous, but the fact that Green knew about it at all, and knew of Anthony, was reassuring. Green’s friendly manner also put him at ease.

As Green ate his lunch, he enquired about Straight’s career plans, in an accent that Straight couldn’t quite place but thought to be European. Straight explained that he had wanted to work for the State Department but was now thinking he might prefer a career in the Labor Department. He planned to spend a few months working for General Motors in Detroit to get experience. Green nodded. They moved on to a discussion of Communist doctrine.

‘Michael Green’ was in fact a Soviet illegal named Iskhak Akhmerov. He had high hopes for Straight, who was naïve and a little directionless but had a potentially high-powered career ahead of him, by virtue of his family ties and wealth. Indeed, the young man was so well connected that on returning from Britain, he had been able to drop by the Oval Office study and talk to President Roosevelt about a possible role in government.

After the meeting, Akhmerov cabled an assessment back to Moscow: ‘He and I have cemented our friendship. He is eager to listen and take my advice. I am exerting as much ideological influence as I can on him.’[1]

In the 1920s, Soviet illegals had focused on recruiting lowly cipher clerks and embassy secretaries in Europe to get their hands on the secrets of rival nations, but in the 1930s a more ambitious strategy emerged: recruiting promising young leftists, with the hope that in time they would penetrate Western decision-making centres. Blunt, Michael Straight’s recruiter in Cambridge, also tapped several British students around the same time. One of them, Kim Philby, would rise to the very top of the British intelligence hierarchy while all the time being a Soviet double agent. The Centre had similar hopes for America. Before long, Iskhak

Akhmerov would be running a number of sources in the heart of the US establishment, fighting the first battles of the Cold War long before the Americans even realised they were engaged in it.

The United States had been a low priority for the INO in the 1920s. America was initially included as part of the work of the agency's British department, 'as it was an Anglo-Saxon country and because it did not bother us much anyway', in the words of one officer.[2] Neither did the beating heart of the capitalist world order seem like fertile ground for imminent revolution. 'The American proletariat is contaminated with bourgeois tendencies such as thrift, the acquisition of property and automobiles,' complained the Comintern's Pyatnitsky.[3]

In January 1930, when the Politburo met amid Stalin's demands for an enhanced focus on foreign intelligence, the United States was still far from a top priority, but it gradually began to feature more prominently in the thinking of the intelligence bosses at Lubyanka. In 1932, Moscow deployed Valentin Markin to New York as the first illegal resident in the United States. A year later, the two countries finally set up official diplomatic relations, which meant the INO could also send legal officers under diplomatic cover to the newly opened embassy.

Moscow hoped the economic upheaval of the Great Depression would create the conditions for popular unrest in America, but the INO also took note of Washington's growing clout on the world stage. 'There are no problems, not even purely European ones, that America doesn't take part in resolving by virtue of its economic and financial might,' read a cable sent to Markin and other intelligence agents in 1934. 'This situation necessitates from our intelligence in the USA … that available agents and those intended for recruitment provide us with documents and agent-verified materials covering the USA's positions.'[4]

America's rapidly developing economy was also of interest as Stalin launched a massive industrialisation drive in the Soviet Union. 'Technical intelligence in the USA is the main focus of our work,' the Centre declared in 1934, urging Markin and others to recruit sources who could provide access to America's scientific and technological secrets.[5]

Markin adopted the name Irving Steppin and used the part-ownership of a small cosmetics company as his cover. He spoke excellent German but terrible, strongly accented English. Rather than attempting to recruit

American sources directly, Markin worked with local intermediaries from the American Communist Party, the CPUSA. Partly, this was born of linguistic necessity, but it also made sense strategically. The Centre wanted to build up a network of leftists in and around the US government who would provide intelligence and documents out of ideological conviction. It was a better idea to let them think they were working for the CPUSA, rather than for Soviet intelligence, aiding a noble domestic political cause rather than committing treason.

The CPUSA was founded shortly after the Russian Revolution and took its cues from the Comintern, advocating for a Leninist combination of legal and illegal work in the fight against the American government: 'two arms, one out in the open, functioning publicly, the other unseen, secret, underground'.[6] As well as its official New York headquarters, located two blocks south of Union Square, the party had a number of clandestine networks. The INO was able to make extensive use of these, leveraging them to gain a foothold in America without much trouble from the authorities. The Bureau of Investigation (which would add 'Federal' to its name in 1935) tried to stamp out these Communist networks from the American political landscape. But with only a few hundred agents, and the growth of organised crime in the 1930s, the bureau had more important priorities.

Markin's first recruits were Alexander and Helen Koral, a left-leaning couple with two young sons. They took on the role of fixers for his new residency, bribing immigration officials in exchange for materials while acting as photographers and couriers. Markin used their Manhattan apartment on East Eighty-Eighth Street as a place to store cash and documents. Alexander gave him regular English lessons there too, trying to improve his limited vocabulary and harsh Slavic pronunciation.

The Korals knew Markin by his cover identity, but other agents only knew him by his code names. The leftist writer Whittaker Chambers knew him as Herman, and thought he had 'pitiless eyes' set in a 'soft, chalky face that suggested corruption'. Others noted his grey complexion and bad teeth, and described him as ruthless and cruel when sober and extremely sentimental when drunk, which was often. His steely demeanour would dissolve with alcohol, leaving him liable to burst into tears. He would express dismay that his wife and son were back in the Soviet Union and torment over the fact his son was paralysed and

confined to a wheelchair. ‘What will happen to them when I’m gone?’ he would wail.[7]

This happened sooner than Markin anticipated. The illegal, who was sober increasingly infrequently, was killed in the summer of 1934 in a bar fight apparently unconnected to his espionage work.[8] Iskhak Akhmerov, who had arrived in New York to be Markin’s deputy resident a few months earlier and would later handle Michael Straight, was left to tie up loose ends and make sure US authorities noticed nothing suspicious about the deceased man.

Iskhak was born into a Tatar family near the city of Kazan in 1901, the same year as Dmitry Bystrolyotov. Like Dmitry, he watched the bloody tumult of Russia’s revolution and Civil War play out during his formative years. After dropping out of school to work as an apprentice to his furrier grandfather, the eighteen-year-old Iskhak joined the Bolsheviks in 1919 and began a heady rise through the ranks. At the end of 1921, he was sent to Petrograd to study in the newly founded Communist University, housed in the palace where the tsar’s short-lived Duma had met a decade previously. The school trained new cadres for three months in the basics of Marxist thought and political organisation and then sent them off as agitators to the peripheries of the Soviet state.

After some time in Central Asia, Iskhak transferred to Moscow, where he signed up with the foreign affairs department at the city’s most prestigious university and studied English, French and Turkish. After several tours of duty in far-flung outposts of the Soviet Empire, and a stint working in Soviet diplomatic missions in Turkey, he was recruited by the INO’s illegals department and sent on his first mission to Peking. Posing as a Turkish student, Edir Bey, he enrolled for English classes at Yenching University, an American establishment that taught Chinese to British and American missionaries.[9] Iskhak was to hone his English while making contacts with Westerners and gaining intelligence on the political situation in China. After some months, he was recalled to Moscow for a new mission.

Iskhak arrived in New York by ship on 23 April 1934, using his Turkish papers. He enrolled in an intensive English-language course at Columbia University and spent long hours at the New York Public Library, reading newspapers and books to absorb as much as he could

about American life. For a boy from the Russian provinces, moving to New York was like stepping into another dimension. He marvelled at the vast portions of food served in the diners and cafeterias and walked for hours along Manhattan's avenues, looking up in wonder. New symbolic expressions of capitalist ambition had appeared in the post-crash years: the Empire State Building had been completed in 1931 and construction was under way on Rockefeller Center. Still, there was more than enough visible injustice and poverty to reinforce the teachings Iskhak had received about the moral bankruptcy of capitalism.

The summer of 1934, Iskhak's first in New York, was unbearably hot. In early July, a dust blizzard swept through the city, reducing visibility to three feet; a thunderstorm that caused flash flooding followed soon after.[10] The heat and dust gave Iskhak no end of health troubles, inflaming an eye infection he had picked up in China and leaving him with permanently bloodshot eyes. Nevertheless, his legalisation in the United States moved forward quickly. The Korals had obtained a birth certificate for a certain William Greinke, who had been born in New York City in 1903 to German parents and died as an infant. Alexander Koral certified Iskhak's passport application with the fraudulent statement that he had known 'Bill Greinke' for fifteen years. On 29 September, four months after his arrival in the United States, Iskhak was issued a US passport. Overnight, he stopped posing as a Turkish student and stepped into the role of a native New Yorker.

As Bill, Iskhak rented an apartment at 10 East Eighty-Third Street, a ten-minute stroll from the Korals' apartment on East Eighty-Eighth and just a block from Central Park. Helen Koral acted as a courier for documents and cash between Iskhak and the Soviet consulate. The Vienna-born Communist Hede Massing was another key part of his network. She had arrived in New York in October 1933 with papers identifying her as a correspondent for the *Weltbühne*, a liberal German newspaper that had relocated to Prague after the Nazi takeover. She frequently served as a courier, delivering tiny packages stuffed with microfilm negatives from America to Paris, where she handed them to INO contacts who in turn sent them on to Moscow.

Iskhak had keys to Massing's apartment on Fifty-Second Street and would sometimes drop by unannounced. Other meetings were scheduled over the telephone using a prearranged code. Often, they met on a stone

bench outside the Fifth Avenue entrance to the New York Public Library's main branch.[11] Among Massing's tasks was assembling a roster of doctors, lawyers and other professionals who, should their services be required, would not ask too many questions about the accents and provenance of their clients. She was also a useful link between Iskhak and members of the CPUSA underground, who carried out various tasks for the Soviet agents.

The Communists were still a marginal force on the American political scene, but the Depression years had brought more public sympathy to their cause, making it easier for them to recruit among elites. The CPUSA's experience in running underground networks, even if lax by the standards of the NKVD, made them extremely valuable local partners. Many CPUSA organisers were naturalised immigrants from Eastern Europe, including the Hungarian-born Joseph Peters, who worked as a fixer for both CPUSA and NKVD networks, as well as for a wholly separate ring of spies run by Soviet military intelligence. Massing introduced Peters to Iskhak as someone who could procure American passports, naturalisation papers and birth certificates for operatives and agents.[12]

Through Peters, Iskhak also met Gerald Graze, a government official in the Civil Service Commission and secretly a member of the CPUSA's underground network. Graze's job was to investigate workplace complaints among government employees. Iskhak asked him to copy useful information, as well as to enquire subtly about political leanings whenever he was interviewing civil servants. Graze also rented a small apartment for $25 a month, where Iskhak installed another NKVD illegal, who used it as a studio in which to photograph documents provided by Graze and others.

As Bill Greinke, Iskhak had taken on the hardest task for any illegal: posing as a native of the country of operations. This was an almost impossible feat, which was why typically the Centre gave their illegals third nationalities, such as Dmitry Bystrolyotov's turn as the Hungarian Perelly while working in Britain. Iskhak gave himself away as a non-native New Yorker as soon as he opened his mouth. Massing, who knew him only as Bill, had no doubt that her new handler was Russian. She saw in him a 'dumb, arrogant, conceited … *apparatchik*', the kind she remembered meeting during a year-long stay in Moscow.

Certainly, Iskhak did not glide through New York society as easily as Dmitry had moved around London. It was far from ideal that he claimed to be of German parentage yet barely spoke a word of German. He did not look particularly German either, with his dark, inflamed eyes and thick black hair. But Iskhak took care that most people with whom he interacted closely were trusted Communist contacts. For short, everyday interactions in shops or restaurants, his questionable origins mattered less in New York than they might have in London or Paris. This was a city of immigrants, after all, and nobody paid much attention to one more person with an unplaceable accent.

In 1935, Iskhak was joined in New York by Boris Bazarov, the veteran illegal who had worked with Dmitry to handle Ernest Oldham, when he had played the grumpy Italian Communist da Vinci. Bazarov was a smoother operator than Iskhak and able to charm those he worked with, particularly Massing. To mark the eighteenth anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution on 7 November 1935, he sent her fifty long-stemmed red roses with a note in a mishmash of English and German that read, ‘Our lives are unnatural, but we must endure it for humanity. Though we cannot always express it, our little group is bound by love and affection for each other.’

Massing appreciated Bazarov’s gesture and believed him to be an agent of a much higher calibre than Iskhak, the ‘Muscovite automaton’. The more time Massing spent with Iskhak, the more she disliked him. She found his manner insufferable and thought he looked sickly and malnourished. She noted his inflamed eyes and surmised they were ‘the small, unpretty eyes of an unimaginative, frightened little man’. There was an element of classism to Massing’s disdain: Iskhak had indeed grown up in the Russian provinces, with none of the cosmopolitan upbringing or privileged background that many other early illegals had enjoyed, and he had left school before he became a teenager. But Massing might also have been reacting to a misogynist edge in her handler. Iskhak seems to have felt threatened by powerful, intellectual women such as Massing, who often found him to be patronising and sleazy.

There was one exception: Kansas-born Helen Lowry, a niece of the CPUSA leader Earl Browder, who had been recommended to Iskhak and

Bazarov by Browder as a reliable assistant. Bazarov cabled back to Moscow with a positive appraisal of Helen: ‘A serious, calm and thoughtful girl, she’s committed to us with her soul … and knows stenography and typewriting.’ Bazarov planned to relocate Helen to Washington, where her all-American looks and midwestern accent would make her far less conspicuous than any illegal. Iskhak began tutoring her in the basics of *konspiratsiya*, and the pair quickly hit it off. Iskhak was already married to a Russian woman, but he fell for Helen. The couple would spend the rest of their lives together.[13]

Living with Helen led to a rapid improvement in Iskhak’s English. His wardrobe was also becoming sharper; he used the Centre’s money to purchase an array of brown business suits and straw hats. By the time he met with Michael Straight in late 1937, Iskhak had refined both his language and his manner. If he did retain some of the provincial airs that had so offended Massing, Straight perhaps saw in them something noble and genuine. Having been born into one of the wealthiest families in America, Straight craved authenticity and meaning, and he hoped to find it in the Communist movement. His income from his stake in the family fortune was $75,000 a year, an enormous sum for the time, and he was equal parts ashamed and boastful of his wealth. On one occasion, he casually asked Iskhak if the illegal would like $12,000 that he happened to have lying around and did not need. Iskhak chuckled and advised Straight to put the money in the bank, though when he cabled back to the Centre about the incident, he received a terse response: ‘Get this money from him and send it to us.’[14]

On the Centre’s advice, Iskhak dissuaded Straight from his plan to take a job in Detroit and suggested he resurrect his initial idea of joining the State Department. Straight agreed, and in early 1938 he moved to Washington to do so. His first task in his new job was to produce a report on European armaments, which he also shared with Iskhak. The Centre was impatient for access to juicier, classified material and instructed Iskhak to train Straight in ferreting out potentially useful secrets: ‘Find out all his connections one by one, note the most valuable ones, and teach him how to gather identifying material using these valuable leads, how to get close to designated people.’

Before long, though, the Centre changed tack, deciding not to push Straight too hard and to instead play the long game. After all, he was only

in his early twenties and might have a long career in government ahead of him. It was better to conserve Straight for future greatness than risk blowing his cover by having him pursue low-level secrets too eagerly.

Iskhak travelled regularly to Washington, DC, for lunch meetings with Straight, combining them with liaisons with Laurence Duggan, another State Department source who proved much more useful.[15] Like Straight, Duggan had benefited from family connections among the upper echelons of the American political elite. After graduating from Harvard, he took a job at the State Department in 1930. By 1934, the NKVD had earmarked him as a Soviet sympathiser and assigned Massing to handle him. The only thing that made all the dinner-jacketed receptions bearable for him, Duggan told her, was the notion of being useful to the Soviet cause.

In 1937, Duggan was promoted to division head, giving him access to every telegram coming into the State Department. With this happy development, the Centre ordered Iskhak to replace Massing and handle Duggan directly. Iskhak set up a routine: once every two weeks, he travelled from New York to Washington. On the agreed day, Duggan would leave the State Department for lunch with a thick stack of telegrams surreptitiously stuffed into his briefcase. After he had walked a few blocks and determined there was nobody observing, Iskhak would materialise, grab the documents, and jump into a taxi that would deliver him to a nearby apartment, rented for him by his agent Gerald Graze. There, another Soviet officer would be waiting, camera at the ready. After a quick photo session, Iskhak would scoop the documents up and speed them back to Duggan, who by now had emerged from a restaurant, after a solo lunch, and was on his way back to work.

It was a nerve-racking routine, and it did not help that Duggan hardly had the constitution for intrigue. He was terrified of discovery, and the longer he worked with Iskhak, the more frightened he became. These concerns reached fever pitch when the purges began in Moscow. Duggan asked how his identity could possibly be safe, if there were really so many enemy spies inside the Soviet intelligence apparatus. By 1938, with ever more news of the purges coming out of Moscow, Iskhak spent most of their sessions begging Duggan not to break off contact.

In June 1939, Iskhak reported an ‘agonizing conversation’ with Duggan lasting more than three hours. The illegal urged his source to

focus on the bigger global picture. Fascist Germany was plotting to unleash a terrible imperialist war, he said, and by helping the Soviet Union, Duggan was aiding not only Moscow but the whole of progressive humanity. For many concerned sources this was a persuasive argument. However grim the news coming from Soviet Russia might be, the stated goals of Communism remained noble and emancipatory. Hitler's increasingly menacing posturing was the greater threat.

On 23 August, news came of a deal that blew this reasoning out of the water. The Soviet Union and Nazi Germany had signed a non-aggression pact, and on 1 September, Hitler invaded Poland. In a secret addendum to the treaty, Moscow and Berlin agreed to divide territory between them, and the Soviet army invaded Poland, from the east, on 17 September. German and Soviet troops held a joint parade in the city of Brest, close to the new dividing line that Hitler and Stalin had drawn for themselves. Infantry, motorised units and tanks passed the makeshift viewing platform where the Nazi general Heinz Guderian and the Soviet commander Semyon Krivoshein stood at attention. After the parade, a band played 'Deutschland über Alles', followed by 'The Internationale', the Soviet anthem.[16]

The Soviet line was that Europe's capitalist nations had proved unwilling to form a joint front with Moscow against Germany, leaving the Soviet Union with no choice. But the optics were horrific, both at home and abroad. For years, the *raison d'être* of the Soviet state had been to stand against fascism and imperialism; moreover, tens of thousands of Soviet officials had recently been executed for supposedly helping fascist Germany. Now Stalin himself had made a deal with Hitler.

Duggan was moody and depressed over the news from Europe and begged Iskhak to sever ties. Straight, too, was disturbed. He passed his handler a memorandum explaining why he thought the pact would be a disaster for the Soviet Union and the world. Iskhak did his best to persuade Straight that the agreement was in fact a triumph of diplomacy. 'Great days are approaching,' he said, prophesying that Soviet soldiers would be welcomed as liberators in Eastern Europe and revolution would spread to Germany and France.

Iskhak, in all likelihood, was just as alarmed by the agreement as Straight. He soon had even more to worry about, when he received a summons from the Centre to return home. A year previously, his boss,

Boris Bazarov, had been recalled, to be shot as an enemy of the people. Iskhak knew he might face the same fate. He and Helen discussed what they should do. In the end, they decided to risk going home, and the couple set off in November 1939, hoping their lives would be spared.

On his return, Iskhak had to face Lavrentiy Beria, who had taken over the NKVD after Yezhov's arrest. Beria wound down the mass violence of the purges, but he was no less ruthless than his predecessor. A sadistic creep, he was known to torture his enemies personally, his thin lips pursed in chilling disdain and dark eyes looking out from behind a pince-nez. Sometimes, he sent his goons to snatch women off the street and bring them to his mansion in central Moscow. Beria spared Iskhak from arrest, but gave him a humiliating demotion, appointing him a junior assistant in the INO's American department at Lubyanka, even though he had more experience in real espionage work than most people in the building. His new boss, Vitaly Pavlov, was twenty-five years old. Pavlov's only work experience, before his recent draft into the NKVD, had been at a Siberian locomotive repair factory.

The purges had decimated the NKVD's European networks, and now with Iskhak's recall there were no illegals left in the United States either. But rather than repair this self-inflicted destruction, Beria was focused on planning one mission, the orders for which came directly from Stalin. It was known as Operation Duck.

6

Operation Duck:

The Assassination of Leon Trotsky

Beria summoned Pavel Sudoplatov to his office one evening in March 1939. A promising young illegal who specialised in assassinations, Sudoplatov had recently returned from a mission in which he had spent several months undercover, posing as a trusted confidant of Yevhen Konovalets, a Ukrainian nationalist leader seen as a possible threat to Soviet rule. After winning the confidence of Konovalets, Sudoplatov took advantage of his target's sweet tooth and blew him up with a booby-trapped box of chocolates in a Rotterdam café.[1] Sudoplatov had survived the purges, but numerous accusations of his supposed ideological deviancy were still floating in the air. He wondered if the call from Beria would mark the moment it all ended for him. Instead, Beria asked Sudoplatov to accompany him to an important meeting. It was only when the car approached the towers of the Kremlin that Sudoplatov realised whom they were going to see.

Inside the Kremlin, Beria and Sudoplatov walked across the cobbles to the eighteenth-century Senate building. Taking the stairs to the second floor, they came to a long corridor lined with red carpet leading to a vast reception room. Alexander Poskrebyshev, Stalin's chief of staff, sat at a desk under a photo portraying a dashing young Stalin during the Civil War. Poskrebyshev greeted Beria in a low voice, without emotion, and ushered the visitors through the double doors into the next room.

Stalin's office had dark wood panelling and ruched curtains; a portrait of Lenin looked down from the walls. Stalin rose from behind a desk and greeted his visitors. The Soviet leader, who had just turned sixty, looked older and more haggard in person than in newsreels. His face was pockmarked, and his moustache and teeth were yellow from tobacco. But Sudoplatov thought Stalin, who was wearing his usual baggy military-style tunic, appeared focused and poised. The Soviet leader paced slowly

back and forth across the room as Beria laid out the current plan for intelligence operations and explained that he had selected Sudoplatov to be the new deputy head of foreign intelligence, in charge of all operations against Trotskyites. Stalin flicked a match and lit the pipe he had been holding in his hand.

'There are no important figures in the Trotskyite movement except Trotsky himself. If Trotsky is finished the threat will be eliminated,' Stalin said, returning to his seat.[2]

Trotsky had been banished from the Soviet Union in February 1929, before Stalin felt confident enough to arrest and execute his political enemies. He took up residence in a grand mansion on an island just outside Istanbul. While there, he wrote his three-volume *History of the Russian Revolution*, which accused Stalin of destroying Lenin's legacy. He left in 1933, moving to Paris and then Norway. The first Moscow show trial in 1936 sentenced him to death, and the NKVD had long been tasked with planning his assassination, but the repeated arrests of those in charge had meant the mission was never seen through to conclusion.

Trotsky, eager to move farther away from potential Soviet assassins, took up an offer of refuge from the Mexican government and arrived in the country aboard an oil tanker in January 1937. He and his wife settled in the Coyoacán neighbourhood of Mexico City, as guests of the artists Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo in the couple's Blue House. Trotsky and Kahlo soon embarked on a brief affair, which led to tension between Trotsky and Rivera and created problems for Trotsky in his own marriage. In the end, he and his wife moved out, to a nearby villa on Avenida Viena. Trotsky had the iron railings replaced with a high concrete wall featuring battlement towers, giving it the look of a prison.

Stalin took Trotsky's continued survival as a personal insult. Tens of thousands of people had just been executed as Trotskyites, yet the man himself was somehow alive and well. From Mexico, he continued to publish a steady stream of venomous criticism of Stalin's rule. Stalin wanted personal revenge, but he also feared that Trotsky's influence on parts of the global leftist movement was destroying Communist unity, as had become apparent during the infighting between Communist factions during the Spanish Civil War.

‘Without the elimination of Trotsky … when the imperialists attack the Soviet Union, we cannot rely on our allies in the international Communist movement,’ he told Beria and Sudoplatov. He gave them a year to make it happen. Sudoplatov tried to find a way to explain tactfully to the supreme leader that, given he spoke no Spanish, he might not be the best person for a job in Mexico City.

‘It is your job and your party duty to find and select suitable and reliable personnel to carry out the assignment,’ growled Stalin, in his Georgian accent. ‘You will be provided with whatever assistance and support you need. Report directly to Comrade Beria and nobody else, but the full responsibility for carrying out the mission remains with you.’

Sudoplatov asked Naum Eitingon, who had just returned to Moscow from a three-year posting running Soviet intelligence networks in Spain during its civil war, to help him work up a plan. They decided to form two separate assassination groups, drawing on Eitingon’s contacts. The two teams would be trained separately and not be told about the existence of each other. The first group would use brute force to storm Trotsky’s compound and then execute him. A second, more subtle option was also put into development, should the first group fail.

Eitingon appointed Iosif Grigulevich, a young Lithuanian Jew who would later become one of the most renowned Soviet illegals, to run the first group. Grigulevich spoke fluent Spanish after spending some of his teenage years in Argentina, and in Spain he had specialised in killing Trotskyites and training arsonists behind enemy lines. Always well dressed, with dark, sparkling eyes and thick black hair, Grigulevich disguised his ruthless nature with a breezy charm. Like Eitingon and Sudoplatov, he had survived the purges by the skin of his teeth, and he was now dispatched to Mexico to oversee the assassination. He posed as a Frenchman, introducing an exaggerated Gallic twang to his Spanish and giving his name as Felipe to the Mexicans in the hit squad. He appointed the Mexican painter and Stalinist David Siqueiros, who also had combat experience from Spain, as his deputy. Crucially, he also made friends with Robert Sheldon Harte, a young American who worked at Trotsky’s villa as a security guard and assistant.

The attack was planned for one night in May 1940. Grigulevich and the gang dressed in police uniforms; Siqueiros wore a raincoat, glasses and a false moustache. The team approached the compound stealthily and

managed to disarm and tie up the guards without firing a shot. Harte then opened the gate for his friend, in what was presumably a prearranged agreement. The men rushed into the compound. Trotsky awoke to the sound of gunshots and for a brief moment thought there might be fireworks, before he quickly realised what was happening. He and his wife threw themselves to the floor, but the attackers closed in on the room simultaneously from two doors and the window to the garden. After some minutes, the gunfire stopped, and the men dashed away. Somehow, Trotsky and his wife survived the attack without even a scratch. The only casualty of the night was Harte, shot dead to prevent him from identifying the illegal who had won his confidence.

It was so implausible that a team of assassins could make it as far as Trotsky's bedroom and then fail to kill him that Mexican police initially suspected the whole operation might have been a publicity stunt arranged by Trotsky himself. For Grigulevich, it was an inexplicable failure in a career that would later be distinguished by repeated success. He did, at least, manage to escape the attention of the Mexican police. Colonel Leandro Sánchez Salazar, who led the investigation, identified a house in the Acacias district a mile away from Trotsky's home as the safe house used by the attack's ringleader, but by the time his men raided it, all that was left was some luxurious underwear purchased on the Boulevard Saint-Michel in Paris. After interrogating a member of the assassination squad who spilled the beans about the mysterious French organiser of the attack, Salazar put out an arrest warrant for 'Felipe' the Frenchman. Grigulevich lay low, altering his appearance and moving between different safe houses. According to one account, he later fled north across the border and headed for a safe house in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Another version is that he checked into a psychiatric institution, where he was able to stay incognito for two months until the furore had died down and he could leave for Havana.[3] Either way, he escaped Mexican authorities, who never worked out his real identity.

Eitingon, who had entered America in late 1939 on a forged Iraqi passport and had been shuttling between New York and Mexico City ahead of the hit, feared the failure meant both he and Grigulevich would face execution. He cabled Moscow about the second group he had been preparing and begged to be allowed another chance. When his report

arrived in Moscow, Beria took Sudoplatov to see Stalin again, this time at the leader's dacha outside Moscow. The mercurial Stalin took the bad news surprisingly well, approving the use of the second team and inviting the guests to stay for dinner.

After the failed attack, Trotsky arranged for even more fortifications to be added to his villa. Storming it again was out of the question. The second group, a mother-and-son duo, would act through slow infiltration. Caridad Mercader was a Cuban-born Communist who had left her wealthy Spanish husband to fight in the Spanish Civil War, where she met Eitingon and became his lover. Eitingon also recruited Caridad's dashing young son, Ramón. As Franco's forces neared victory, Eitingon helped the pair resettle in Paris. There, in June 1938, Ramón engineered a meeting with a woman named Sylvia Ageloff, a social worker from Brooklyn and one of three sisters who knew Trotsky personally. She had travelled to France to take part in the opening congress of the Fourth International, the global Communist body Trotsky established to rival the Stalinist Comintern. The handsome Mercader introduced himself to Sylvia as Jacques Mornard, a Belgian businessman who had little time for politics but was passionate about theatre. He quickly won Sylvia over, and the pair spent several months in Paris together before Sylvia returned to New York in February 1939.

When Eitingon was recruiting for Operation Duck, he remembered his former lover and her son with the Trotskyite connections and briefed them on the new mission. Late in 1939, Caridad and Ramón set sail for New York. On their arrival, Ramón called Sylvia and told her he had found a job in Mexico City. He asked if she might like to move there with him. Jumping at the chance to be in the same place as Trotsky, her political idol, Sylvia happily agreed. Ramón explained to her that he had fled to avoid being called up to the Belgian army and had used a fake Canadian passport to flee in the name of Frank Jacson. The Cuban was now a double illegal: he was Ramón Mercader pretending to be Jacques Mornard pretending to be Frank Jacson.

On arrival in Mexico City, Ramón played the long game. He drove Sylvia to Trotsky's villa on occasion, but he didn't try to force his way in, instead waiting for her in the car outside. He was invited into the compound for the first time in May, just five days after the failed

Siqueiros attack. He exchanged friendly chitchat with Trotsky but did not linger, instead gifting a toy glider to Trotsky's grandson. Ramón became a weekly visitor to the villa, often bringing small gifts and never outstaying his welcome. On 20 August, he came clutching the text of an article he had written and asked for Trotsky's thoughts. Ramón was already well known to the guards, so nobody thought to search him on arrival, even though he was rather oddly attired for a sunny day, in a long overcoat. A block away, Eitingon and Caridad waited in a getaway car. As Trotsky read over the pages in his study, Ramón pulled an ice pick from inside his overcoat, approached Trotsky from behind, and sank it into his skull. The attack only wounded Trotsky, and he let out a piercing scream that alerted the guards. They burst into the room and set about attacking Ramón, but Trotsky called out that they should not kill him so he could be questioned. Ramón was arrested; Trotsky died from his wounds in hospital the next day. Caridad and Eitingon had sped away from the house when they realised what had happened and began a long journey via Cuba, New York, and China back to Moscow.

Mexican police set about trying to determine the identity of the assassin, who was now in hospital after receiving a beating from Trotsky's guards. A distraught Sylvia Ageloff explained to police that her lover, who she now realised had abused her trust to get close to Trotsky, was not a Canadian and not called Frank Jacson, but was in fact a Belgian named Jacques Mornard. An official of the Belgian legation in Mexico City was summoned to the hospital. He said he had the strong impression the man was not Belgian either, noting that the Jesuit college in Brussels he claimed to have studied at did not exist and that his French accent sounded Swiss.[4] Even at trial, Ramón Mercader refused to give up his real name or nationality. He was sentenced to twenty years in prison.

It had taken two attempts, but Operation Duck had succeeded. A decade after he had left the Soviet Union, Trotsky was finally dead. The man who had done so much to hone the codes of *konspiratsiya* in the years before the revolution had met his end at the hand of an operative who had adhered to them impressively well.

In the Soviet Union, there was little public discussion of the death of Stalin's number one enemy. A small article on page 3 of *Pravda* noted that Trotsky had been killed by someone from his close entourage. Stalin

drafted the article personally and headlined it ‘The Death of an International Spy’.[5]

7

Operation Barbarossa:

Hitler Invades the Soviet Union

For twenty-two months after the signing of the non-aggression pact with Hitler, Stalin remained convinced that his new ally would not dare break their agreement and attack the Soviet Union. He was sure the Nazis would wait to conquer Britain before turning their attention eastward, believing Hitler would not make the same mistake as Germany had during World War I and open two fronts simultaneously. Stalin received reports, many of them via illegals, that gave ample warning of Hitler's real plans. But his obsession with *konspiratsiya* led him to assume they were part of a deception game, and in the system he had built, there was nobody left who was brave or stupid enough to express even mild disagreement when the Great Leader was wrong. So it was that Stalin, the man who saw anti-Soviet conspiracies everywhere, managed to miss the biggest plot of all.

In May 1939, Stalin appointed Pavel Fitin his new head of foreign intelligence. Just thirty-one, Fitin had only entered the NKVD the previous year, receiving five months of training as an entry-level operative. Unlike some of the other yes-men to benefit from the purges, Fitin was well liked, but he could not be expected to run an entire intelligence service efficiently with just one year of experience. He presided over an agency that had been thoroughly decimated. Many INO residents had been shot, and others like Akhmerov withdrawn, leaving behind promising networks of sources but nobody to handle them. The London legal residency closed down completely in February 1940, while its counterpart in Berlin shrank from sixteen operatives in 1935 to just two by 1939. That year, the Beria favourite Amayak Kobulov, who spoke no German and had never left the Soviet Union, became the new legal resident in Germany, undercover as an embassy counsellor.

Plenty of useful intelligence still arrived in Moscow, particularly from Britain. The Centre sent four legal officers to reopen the London residency, and in early 1941 they renewed contact with members of the Cambridge Five, the British leftist sympathisers recruited around the same time as Michael Straight, who had now risen to prominent positions. John Cairncross was private secretary to one of Winston Churchill's ministers, and Kim Philby had been hired by the Special Operations Executive, the new British subversion agency designed to carry out sabotage behind enemy lines. During 1941, the NKVD's London residency sent nearly eight thousand classified British diplomatic and political documents back to Moscow, a remarkable haul. But much of it was ignored or disregarded, amid fears the Cambridge Five could be double agents, part of a sophisticated British plot to feed the Centre false intelligence.

The increasingly alarming German war planning led several German officials to pass on secrets to Soviet sources, through networks developed before the purges. In late December 1940, the führer signed top-secret Directive 21, which ordered that even before Britain was defeated, German forces should be prepared to 'annihilate Soviet Russia in a swift campaign', code-named Operation Barbarossa, with a provisional date set for mid-May 1941. Only a few people at the top of the Nazi military command knew about the order, but Soviet agents soon received chatter about it and forwarded news of the directive to Moscow.

Over the next months, the whispers about a possible German attack steadily became a cacophony, arriving on Fitin's desk from multiple sources. Some of the most reliable information came from Richard Sorge, a brilliant illegal run by Soviet military intelligence. A German Communist, Sorge had first been recruited by the Comintern in the 1920s. Since 1933, he had been based in Japan, using his own name but posing as a Nazi-sympathising German journalist. He was close to Eugen Ott, an attaché at the German embassy in Tokyo who, in 1938, was promoted to ambassador. Ott saw Sorge as his best friend and closest adviser and shared all the top-secret dispatches he received from Berlin with him immediately. Sorge promptly radioed information about Hitler's preparations back to Moscow. His dispatches, however, contradicted the official line in Moscow. In February 1941, the head of military intelligence, Filipp Golikov, cabled Sorge complaining that his materials

were ‘not secret and not timely’. Golikov also announced he was cutting Sorge’s expense budget.[1] Sorge was probably the best-placed Soviet spy anywhere in the world, but his overcautious bosses in Moscow were unable to appreciate his access.

In September 1940, the Centre dispatched Alexander Korotkov to Berlin as deputy to the useless resident, Kobulov. Korotkov, who would go on to become chief of a newly formed illegals department after the war, had worked across Europe as an illegal in the 1930s. On 17 September 1940, he called at the apartment of Arvid Harnack on Woyrschstrasse, south of the Tiergarten. In lightly accented German, Korotkov introduced himself as Alexander Erdberg. Harnack, who worked in the Economics Ministry, had been in touch with legal officers at the embassy in the mid-1930s, though he made it clear he was acting as a patriotic anti-Nazi German rather than as a Soviet agent. For the past two years, he had been out of touch with Soviet intelligence, and he was initially suspicious of the approach. Once convinced that Korotkov was not a Gestapo provocateur, Harnack revealed that acting on his own initiative, he had developed a network of resistance figures inside government ministries. His most promising source was Harro Schulze-Boysen, a lieutenant in the Luftwaffe’s intelligence service. Schulze-Boysen was well liked among colleagues – Hermann Göring had been a guest at his wedding – but he harboured a secret disgust for the Nazi cause. Korotkov made separate contact with Schulze-Boysen in March 1941.

Korotkov was so alarmed by what these sources told him about the plans for an attack on the Soviet Union that he bypassed protocol to write directly to Beria, who dismissed the warning as scaremongering. Fitin, the young head of foreign intelligence, did his best to convey the sense of alarm coming from agents across Europe, forwarding more than a hundred warnings of a German attack to Stalin, who mostly ignored them.[2] Military intelligence also continued to receive detailed intelligence from Sorge. On 1 June, he cabled back to Moscow: ‘Berlin informed Ott that the German attack will commence in the latter part of June. Ott 95% certain that war will commence.’ A summary of the cable ended up on Stalin’s desk. ‘Suspicious. To be listed with telegrams intended as provocations,’ Stalin scrawled on it in pencil.[3]

Stalin was sure that Britain was trying to lure him into attacking the Germans first, which would open a second front and reduce the burden on London. Rather than alter his assumptions, he dismissed the mountains of intelligence that the real threat came from Germany.[4] The Germans also helped fuel Stalin's paranoia with a clever misinformation drive, feeding false rumours across the lines. But as June went on, it became ever harder to ignore the flood of intelligence. In mid-June, Korotkov in Berlin sent a message to Moscow, based on intelligence from Schulze-Boysen, that Hitler had taken a final decision to attack the Soviet Union a week later. It was swiftly followed by a further missive: 'All preparations by Germany for an armed attack on the Soviet Union have been completed and the blow can be expected at any time.'

Fitin showed the report to his new boss, Vsevolod Merkulov, one of Beria's cronies, and the pair forwarded it as a matter of urgency to Stalin, who summoned them to see him in the Kremlin. The Soviet leader greeted his nervous guests with a distracted nod of the head.

'I read your report,' Stalin told the pair, a hint of disdain in his voice. Fitin and Merkulov remained silent. Stalin drew on his pipe.

'Who is the person who made this report?'

Fitin described Schulze-Boysen's biography, explaining he was a German ideologically close to the Soviet cause inside the Nazi Ministry of Aviation.

There was a long pause as Stalin continued to pace. Arriving back at his table, he turned around and barked his single-word verdict derisively in the direction of Fitin and Merkulov.

'Disinformation!'

With that, he dismissed the men.

Soviet illegals had penetrated two enemy capitals, providing detailed and specific information about the upcoming Nazi invasion from Tokyo and Berlin. But it was all wasted on Stalin. After dismissing Fitin and Merkulov, he looked again at the report they had brought with them outlining Schulze-Boysen's intelligence. He scrawled a response, in pencil, on the first page: 'Send your source from German aviation to his fucking mother.'

All intelligence services struggle with confirmation bias, and this was particularly pronounced in Soviet Russia, where the political elite were

convinced the world functioned according to the strict laws of Marxism–Leninism. If the reports from the ground did not accord with how Lenin's writings suggested the world should develop, they were discarded as incorrect. The brilliant and inventive tradecraft used by illegals to gather intelligence was rarely matched by the ability to analyse the resulting information properly.

This dynamic only intensified as Stalin's leadership grew ever more paranoid and dictatorial. Those around him jumped through hoops to assure him of the incisiveness of his opinions, and speaking up required extreme courage. On 21 June, Beria ordered four NKVD officers who continued to send reports of German preparations for an attack to be 'ground into labour camp dust'. The same day, he wrote a message to Stalin in his usual sycophantic tone: 'I and my people have firmly embedded in our memory your wise conclusion: Hitler is not going to attack us in 1941.'

That night, the largest invasion force assembled in history began its assault on the Soviet Union.

8

The Whistler:

Undercover Behind Enemy Lines

Nikolai Khokhlov grew up dreaming of becoming a film director or a big-screen actor. He applied to the Soviet Union's top film institute but did not quite make the cut. Instead, the eighteen-year-old Nikolai won admission in 1940 to a newly opened studio of Music Hall Arts, where he perfected a variety-show act based on whistling. In the spring of 1941, he began a tour of the Soviet Union as part of a cabaret troupe. When the Soviet Union entered the war, his father and stepfather enlisted and were sent to the front, but Nikolai was rejected based on his poor eyesight. He was told to carry on with his whistling; after all, entertainment and propaganda were integral parts of the war effort too. He won a small part in a major patriotic film and set off for the shoot in the Urals.

Nikolai returned to Moscow in September 1941, with the city on edge after three months of rapid German advance deep into Soviet territory. Again, he went to the enlistment office to enquire about signing up. The duty officer gave him a phone number and told him to call it. When he did so, a voice asked for his home address and ordered him to await further instructions. Before long, a man appeared at his door and drove him across town to Lubyanka. In an office on the seventh floor, an officer named Mikhail Maklyarsky explained that he was offering Nikolai a mission. 'We have called you for an important assignment for the state. If you want it, of course. We operate only on the principle of voluntary work,' said Maklyarsky. Nikolai felt guilty that he had been whistling onstage while his father and stepfather were at the front. He was ready to do whatever his country needed of him.

By this time, the Germans were just a few dozen miles from the centre of Moscow. The Wehrmacht had taken Minsk within a week and Kyiv by the end of the summer. Soviet forces had been weakened by Stalin's insistence they not be put on high alert ahead of the invasion, as well as

by the execution of many of the best commanders in the preceding years. ‘Lenin left us a great legacy, and we his heirs have shat all over it,’ said Stalin, in a rare moment of panicked introspection, a week after the invasion. In August, Hitler decreed that his armies should focus on taking Crimea and the coal mines of the Donbas before pursuing the drive to seize Moscow, but by September they were again closing in on the capital. Moscow was under threat from foreign forces for the first time since Napoleon had briefly seized it more than a century earlier.

With the Nazi advance pushing farther forward each week, a tactical retreat from Moscow, just as the tsarist forces had done before the eventual victory over Napoleon’s armies, seemed ever more likely. At the NKVD, Maklyarsky had been tasked with planning for an underground movement that would operate in Nazi-controlled Moscow, the mission of which would be to make life hell for the German occupation authorities after the retreat.

Maklyarsky told Nikolai he would be part of a four-person troupe of young artists – a whistler with an actor, a singer and a juggler. They would practise their performance routine now and put on shows at the front to boost morale for the troops. But when the retreat from Moscow took place, the four would remain behind and tell the arriving Germans that they had always sympathised with the Nazi cause.

‘Germans like art, especially if it is not too serious,’ Maklyarsky told Nikolai. ‘If the Germans take Moscow, they will definitely organize a victory parade. And let them do it. Perhaps even Hitler would attend. Imagine a big stage show for the Nazi command! German generals, State officers, all kinds of ministers … and then, suddenly – an explosion!’

Nikolai’s flat in central Moscow became the quartet’s headquarters. The NKVD provided them with a stash of food, money and weapons, including pistols, grenades and explosives. An NKVD colonel took them to fields on the outskirts of Moscow, where they learned about magnetic mines, booby traps, and electric detonators as well as how to build bombs. Nikolai practised how to cut a diagonal length of fuse, insert it into an aluminium tube, and then clamp it closed with his teeth. Inserted into a brick of TNT, it made a crude but deadly explosive device.

Some evenings, an elderly and dignified man who introduced himself as Uncle Petya called at the apartment. He gave them lessons in *konspiratsiya:* how to arrange secret meetings and ensure attendees were

not trailed, how to spot surveillance, and how to carry arms and explosives around Moscow while evading detection. It was all very new to Nikolai, who was still a teenager, but it was impossible not to take these surreal tasks seriously as the atmosphere in Moscow grew more tense by the week. During the day, there were frequent fights in food queues, and wild rumours spread quickly among panicked locals. At night, curfew and blackout brought an eerie stillness to the city.

On 8 October, the State Defence Committee put in motion serious preparations for a retreat, ordering the mining of hundreds of factories, as well as tram parks, bridges, bakeries and power stations. When the order came, detonations were to sound across Moscow, to ensure Hitler's troops would take over charred remains rather than a functioning metropolis. A week later, Stalin held a meeting in his Kremlin office, where it was decided that the Soviet government should evacuate to Kuibyshev, a city on the Volga, several hundred miles away from the front. Defence facilities, universities and theatres would also relocate. Stalin himself would leave the capital within days.

The same day, Maklyarsky summoned Nikolai and his companion Sergei to Lubyanka. As the two friends walked through the streets of central Moscow, there was an acrid smell of burning in the air. Black ash fell from the dark skies over the city as government offices and other facilities burned documents ahead of the withdrawal. Nikolai and Sergei arrived at a scene of frenzied chaos at Lubyanka as secretaries scurried through the corridors, stacks of secret files earmarked for destruction scooped in their arms.

Maklyarsky, in his seventh-floor office, addressed the two young men in a voice at once tender and stern.

'What can I say to you children? Nothing good. We are leaving Moscow. German tanks are already on the outskirts of the city. Remember what you are defending. Wait for communications and instructions.' After brushing their cheeks with farewell kisses, Maklyarsky reminded the two young men to show patience, await orders and gain the trust of the arriving Germans. 'We'll meet in the underground,' he called out, as Nikolai and Sergei walked down the long corridor from his office to the elevator.

The next day, the NKVD leadership, along with top government officials and most of the staff of various ministries, left for Kuibyshev

from Moscow's Kazan Station. The palatial terminus was a maelstrom of activity as thousands of people sought their evacuation trains. The Bolshoi Theatre required seventy-five wagons to transport its artists, their families, and the various costumes and stage decorations. By the end of November, two million people and five hundred factories had been moved out of Moscow, in seventy thousand train journeys. Nikolai and his troupe stayed behind, playing poker and drinking hot tea in the apartment, waiting for the Germans.[1]

In the end, the Wehrmacht never made it to Moscow. The Red Army slowly but surely halted the German advance. 'It is almost incomprehensible and always the same: on the whole the Russian fights with fanatical tenacity,' one German commander wrote to his wife.[2] A symbolic turning point came on 7 November, when Stalin ordered that the traditional parade marking the anniversary of the revolution go ahead. The Soviet leader had composed himself after the shock of the invasion and decided he would not evacuate. He stood with his closest associates atop Lenin's mausoleum the day of the parade, observing as tanks rumbled across Red Square. 'The war you are waging is a war of liberation, a just war,' said Stalin to the assembled troops, in a speech broadcast by radio across the country. He invoked Lenin's philosophy and the legacy of the revolution, but also appealed to the great Russian military heroes of the past.

As the long winter set in, the Nazi advance on the capital faltered. By the end of 1941, an extraordinary 3.1 million Soviet soldiers were either dead, missing in action, or captured, and a further 1.3 million were wounded or sick.[3] But the German advance had been stopped, and the threat to Moscow subsided.

Still, a large part of Soviet territory in Ukraine, Belarus and western Russia was under German occupation. Just as the Bolsheviks had created a department to run illegals 'left behind' during the Civil War, the same was now planned for those areas overrun by the Wehrmacht. 'Conditions must be made unbearable for the enemy forces and all their accomplices,' said Stalin.

Korotkov, the illegal whose Berlin sources had accurately predicted the invasion, was ordered back to Moscow to set up a new training academy. Some of its graduates parachuted behind enemy lines; others

travelled hundreds of miles through forests on skis. Many of these recruits were athletes or workers, hastily retrained as saboteurs, but others were earmarked for long-term undercover missions. By the autumn, the first of these operatives were ready to dispatch, after some rudimentary training not much more intensive than Nikolai Khokhlov had received for his aborted mission in Moscow. Their cover stories were often thin; one student from a Moscow technical institute was dropped by parachute on the outskirts of occupied Mykolaiv in September 1941. His documents identified him as a pro-Nazi Georgian, but he could hardly speak a word of Georgian and spent his days terrified of accidentally running into his 'fellow countrymen'.[4]

Moscow also sent illegals to work in occupied European nations. Often these were foreign Communists who had been recruited in the 1930s. NKVD records suggest 190 illegals were sent to twenty-seven countries during the first three years of the war. Some of them formed a network that became known as the Red Orchestra, which operated inside Nazi territory and was run by Leopold Trepper, a Polish Jewish Communist recruited by Soviet military intelligence in the 1930s and sent to Europe posing as a Quebecois industrialist who ran a raincoat export business in Brussels. Trepper became a key link there for the Red Orchestra after the Nazi takeover of Belgium. Meanwhile, Britain helped the Soviets drop numerous French and German Communists back into their homelands, as part of a top-secret joint programme of illegal infiltrations. Those who managed to evade detection took up clandestine lives under new identities in their home countries.[5]

The Centre also thought up plans for a more ambitious type of infiltration in occupied territory. If trusted Soviet illegals could be trained to impersonate Nazis, they would have more possibilities for covert actions and sabotage behind enemy lines than partisan groups of locals. Sudoplatov remembered Nikolai Khokhlov and thought that the young whistler's acting talents and his Aryan features made him the perfect fit.

In the early hours of New Year's Day 1942, Maklyarsky and Sudoplatov knocked on the door at Nikolai's apartment, bearing bottles of wine and flowers. With a chuckle, Sudoplatov explained to Nikolai that the quartet of music hall saboteurs had not been quite as well drilled in *konspiratsiya* as they had thought during the months they had lain in wait for the Germans. They had invited friends to their apartment and

spoken with knowing glances of the lofty tasks they would soon have to perform. Had the Germans made it to Moscow, it would not have been long before someone gave them away. Nonetheless, it was clear that Nikolai was able to handle pressure, said Sudoplatov, and there was a longer-term assignment for him if he wanted it. He added that he remembered Nikolai's childhood dream of becoming an actor.

'Now, your dream can come true, with this difference: you'll have to direct your own movements, and play the role not on the stage, but in real life,' he said.

Nikolai began training for the new mission in the summer of 1942. One instructor taught him how to mix vodka and glucose into a solution for writing letters in invisible ink, another showed him how to decode radio messages, and a third helped improve his shooting accuracy. He practised parachute jumps from small Douglas aeroplanes. But the most important part of his training came at home, where he was quartered with the German Communist Karl Kleinjung, who had fled his homeland after the Nazi takeover, fought in the Spanish Civil War, and then settled in the Soviet Union.

Karl's task was to help Nikolai swiftly improve his schoolboy German. In just a few months, he would need to pass for a native. Nikolai spent long evenings with Karl, mimicking the German's pronunciation, copying his gestures, and listening to stories about life in Germany. Instructors brought Nazi books and newspapers for Nikolai to leaf through, and each evening he listened to German propaganda radio broadcasts. After some time, both men visited a POW camp in Krasnogorsk, not far from Moscow, where Nikolai and Karl grilled the captured Germans about the everyday life of a Nazi officer. They demanded the men demonstrate how to greet senior officers, parade regulations, and other minor tics that might help the future illegals escape the notice of even careful observers.

Finally, to test everything they had learned, Nikolai and Karl travelled to Obolovka, another POW camp 250 miles outside Moscow. On their arrival in an adjacent town, the local NKVD chief read their letter from Moscow and without further ado sourced some soiled German uniforms. The two men changed, and after they briefly practised a march around the room, the chief called for a guard.

‘Take these and deliver them to the camp,’ he barked at the guard.

‘Yes sir!’ came the reply. ‘Forward, Fritzes!’

For the next month, Nikolai impersonated Walter Latte, a junior officer captured north of Stalingrad. He and Karl settled into camp life without privileges, spending long days unloading logs or digging ditches. Nikolai’s task was to observe, blend in, and try to avoid unnecessary interactions where possible, to avoid scrutiny of his residual Russian accent. He also had to train himself not to react in any way when he heard Russian being spoken, whether it be the barked commands of the guards or the coarse quips of female villagers who worked in a nearby field and liked to taunt the Germans. Only the commander of the camp knew the pair of new arrivals were not real prisoners. For an hour each evening, they stole away to a corner of the camp and discussed how the day had gone with their NKVD ‘curators’ over sausage or other delicacies that supplemented their camp diet of gruel and hard black bread.

On his final evening in the camp, Nikolai noticed an elderly German general approach as he lingered on the path outside his barracks. Nikolai stared fixedly at the sunset, but the old German mistook his stand-offishness for melancholia and clapped his hand on Nikolai’s shoulder.

‘Everything will be all right. We will yet return home,’ said the old man, in a kind and fatherly tone.

On an August night in 1943, an unmarked Douglas plane, camouflaged in grey-green paint and with the lights dimmed, took off from a military airfield outside Moscow and set out on a westward path. Eight men sat on the hard, cold benches inside. With their sturdy helmets and chunky parachute backpacks, they resembled a row of snails. Among them were Karl and Nikolai, wearing German military uniforms underneath their flight overalls. In his pocket, Nikolai carried papers from the Geheime Feldpolizei, the military secret police. The document, printed in slanting German script, identified the bearer as Otto Wittgenstein, a senior lieutenant serving in Front Section 49. He also carried stamped papers ordering Wittgenstein from Orsha to Minsk on assignment. Karl had papers for Corporal Otto Schulze. The idea was that Corporal Schulze, as the junior officer, would do most of the talking for the pair, while Lieutenant Wittgenstein would try to keep his mouth shut.

Officers in Germany's military secret police wore uniforms, but they were also allowed to operate in plain clothes, which would give the two men more flexibility when inside enemy territory.

With a juddering, the plane pulled further upward, sending the men in the cabin sliding down the bench toward the tail. The co-pilot, wearing a fur jacket, came out of the cockpit and shouted, 'We are crossing the front lines!' Nikolai's heart jumped. He knew that at any moment a terrifying gauntlet of anti-aircraft fire could begin. But that night, they were fortunate. The plane flew on to a forested area forty miles from Minsk, where three lit campfires heralded that it was safe to attempt a landing in the fields. The parachutes would not be required. The plane banked steeply and came in for a bumpy landing. From the windows Nikolai could see fountains of sparks as people stamped out the flames. The pilot opened the plane's steel trapdoor, and Nikolai and Karl jumped to the ground, enveloped in almost total darkness, save for the orange glow where the fires had been.

'Comrades Viktor and Volin?' a voice called out, using Karl and Nikolai's code names. The two men stepped forward and shook hands with their unknown guides. They were led away along a quiet country road accompanied by ten men in khaki overalls. As dawn broke, the group approached a swampy marsh. One by one, the men stepped gingerly along narrow logs, balancing with the aid of a stick, to cross the shimmering green bog. Eventually, they reached a small partisan encampment, where Colonel Emmanuil Kutsin met Nikolai and finally told him what his mission would be: the assassination of Wilhelm Kube, the Nazi governor of Belarus.

The logic was simple, said Kutsin. Kube's bodyguards would never let a local on the street near him, but posing as a Nazi officer in uniform, Nikolai could easily get close. Since the mission had first been planned, the situation had grown more challenging, Kutsin admitted. 'Kube is no longer seen taking a walk. He rides in a closed car, and appears in his office unexpectedly and only for a short while. In fact, he has become smarter. But he must be liquidated, all the same!'[6]

The Germans had taken Minsk at the start of the war, after the local Soviet leadership fled. The new rulers immediately singled out the city's large Jewish community for the worst treatment; most of the 100,000

Jews crammed into the Minsk ghetto would not survive the war. For the rest of the population, life became a brutal lottery. *Minsker Zeitung*, the new German occupation newspaper, warned that for every act of sabotage fifty men would be picked at random and shot.[7] Any suspicion of sympathy for the pro-Soviet underground could prove fatal. The occupying forces erected gallows throughout the city, and often bodies were left hanging for weeks, with signs identifying them as enemies of German rule.

The fifty-three-year-old Kube, appointed by Hitler as *Reichskommissar* of Belarus, arrived in Minsk at the beginning of September. A member of the party since 1927, Kube was a zealous ideologue who wrote plays on German folk themes in his spare time. He had no qualms about using violence, but he was a canny administrator and became frustrated at the counterproductive cruelty of the SS units. He thought this squandered the goodwill of many locals, some of whom had initially thought the Nazis might be a welcome alternative to Soviet rule. As the realisation dawned that their new rulers were even more barbaric than the Soviets, whispered recruitment conversations led to the growth of partisan networks. Much of the organisation was spontaneous, but the NKVD quickly tried to take control of the movement, setting up bases in the forests around urban areas and sending in couriers to the cities to pass on messages in code.

By the time Nikolai and Karl set off for Minsk, several other groups of partisans were converging on the city with the same assignment, to eliminate Kube. In June, on the second anniversary of the invasion, one of these groups planted a bomb at a Minsk theatre, with the goal of killing Kube during an afternoon ceremony where he was to announce the creation of a Belarusian branch of the Hitler Youth. The bomb did not detonate until the evening performance, by which time there were no Germans in the theatre.[8]

As the partisan threat to the Nazis heightened, the retaliations became bloodier. During the summer of 1943 the SS launched Operation Cottbus, a ruthless hunt for Soviet sympathisers that resulted in thousands of executions.[9] In this atmosphere, any local was a magnet for suspicion, making Nikolai and Karl's German uniforms all the more valuable. After two weeks of training and orientation at the partisan encampment, they set out with an escort for a long walk through marshland and forests to

reach a sleepy village. From here, they were on their own. They were to head to a safe house on the outskirts of Minsk, the address of which they had committed to memory. There, they would find Marusya, a young woman who had been recruited by Kutsin in one of the villages near the camp. One of her friends from Minsk had fled the city early in the war and left her the keys to her home. Marusya's steady nerves allowed her to flirt her way through checkpoints with easy charm, so she was able to travel in and out of the city at will, acting as a courier and link between the partisan camp and operatives inside the city. The day before Karl and Nikolai left, she headed to the safe house, with instructions to await two Soviet agents wearing German uniforms.

Karl and Nikolai walked from the village to a highway, where they flagged down a passing German military truck. As agreed, Karl did the talking and, ascertaining that the truck was headed to Minsk, asked for a lift. Spotting Nikolai's lieutenant rank, the soldier sitting next to the driver jumped out to make space, but the illegal insisted he would prefer to sit in the back to avoid travel sickness. The less he had to make conversation, the better. Nikolai and Karl sat in the back of the truck, silently, as it approached Minsk. On the outskirts of town, a flag emblazoned with a swastika flew from a sentry post. Nikolai realised he was deep inside enemy territory, with no way out if he made the slightest mistake.

Upon arrival in central Minsk, Karl and Nikolai jumped down from the truck and continued on foot. Locals hurried past without making eye contact, scared off by their German uniforms. Occasionally, small groups of German soldiers saluted the passing officer. With every step, Nikolai's confidence in his disguise grew. Eventually, they reached the agreed address and knocked on the door. Out ran the young Marusya and threw her arms around Nikolai.

'Otto, darling!' she called out joyously, and ushered the two men inside.

Through Marusya, Nikolai and Karl met several locals who were assisting the partisans. Many were suspicious of the two men in Nazi uniform, but Marusya vouched for their bona fides. They had no choice but to trust these new acquaintances, but if just one was a Gestapo informant, it would spell the end of both their mission and their lives. One woman offered an empty apartment for the pair to stay in, and her

friends brought them civilian clothes: a tan suit for Karl and a grey pin-striped number for Nikolai, which he thought made him look like a cross between a Gestapo clerk and a black-market currency speculator. The civilian clothes would draw less attention when coming and going from the apartment. Nikolai and Karl also received keys to several other partisan safe houses – *konskvartiry* – around the city, to use as storage sites and boltholes.

The two illegals were just getting comfortable strolling around Minsk in their new identities when news spread that a partisan wearing a German uniform had been shot dead. Karl and Nikolai began looking over their shoulders at every corner, feeling the eyes of passing officers boring into them, and convinced they were about to be busted. They decided the best way to dispel their nerves was to dive deep into their cover identities and head for the casino, opened by the Germans in a former factory cafeteria. Nazi officers gathered there to drink, gamble and sing. Nikolai and Karl descended into a smoky room and sat at one of the tables drinking mugs of beer. Karl got talking to a corporal from Cologne, while Nikolai played the taciturn superior. The entertainment was a man in a clown suit shouting out jokes in an affected accent that Nikolai found unintelligible, drawing peals of laughter from the assembled Germans. Later, the clown began bashing out a lively tune on the piano, and after a few verses Nikolai picked up the words and joined in. Slowly, he was adapting to his character. As the alcohol warmed his body and he looked around at the men in uniforms that resembled his, it no longer felt to him as if he were a whisker away from failure. Lieutenant Otto Wittgenstein was just one more Nazi officer, unwinding at the casino after a hard day at work.

Once Nikolai and Karl had eased into life in occupied Minsk, they needed to seek out the contacts who could help them carry out their mission. They approached Elena Mazanik, a housekeeper at Kube's mansion in the centre of the city. Kube lived there with his wife, Anita, an actress he had wooed after she appeared in one of his plays, and their children. Elena had worked in a government cafeteria before the outbreak of war and had also been informally employed as an NKVD informer. Her husband had worked as a driver for the NKVD, and when the war broke out, he fled, leaving Elena trapped in Minsk. She found

employment at the officers' casino that Nikolai and Karl had visited, first as a cleaner and then as a waitress. Before he became worried over the threats on his life, Kube frequently visited the casino, to grill pretty female staff about their backgrounds and political views. The women he liked the most received offers to work as housekeepers at his villa.[10]

Elena, at twenty-seven, was too old for Kube's tastes, but she became friendly with Karl Wildenstein, a Nazi officer who served as Kube's right hand, and Wildenstein took a shine to her. He employed her as a maid, at his small suite of rooms on the second floor of the newly built governor's mansion. Later, back in Moscow, interrogators would ask Elena many times if her relationship with Wildenstein had been sexual. He gave her money and vodka and flirted with her, she admitted, but insisted it never went any further.

A courier from Kutsin's partisan encampment relayed information to Nikolai that Elena's husband was alive and well, working as a driver for the NKVD deep in Siberia. The NKVD surmised that Elena was probably not an ideological Nazi, but someone who was trying to get on as best as possible under the regime of the day. As such, she could be amenable to pressure. Nikolai had one of his contacts whisper to Elena that a man had come from Moscow with information about her husband, and entice her to a meeting. When she arrived, Nikolai relayed greetings from her husband, promising that he was 'alive, and in good health'. Then Nikolai told her he had arrived in Minsk on an important mission and needed her help, appealing to her Soviet patriotism and darkly hinting that it was time she proved her allegiances.

'Our country still trusts you. But there is a limit. For a long time, you have refused to face the truth. Now you'll have to,' said Nikolai. 'I am not threatening you, merely reminding you about certain unfortunate circumstances,' he added. Having made his point several times, he paused, seeing that Elena's fingers were clasped to the edge of the table and her face had drained of colour.

'Don't give me your answer at once,' said Nikolai. 'Especially because in your position there can be only one answer. We will not accept another.' With that, he left.

Elena's reluctance to agree was not borne out of loyalty to her German bosses. In fact, she had already been approached by one of the other groups targeting Kube. As one of the few people in Minsk with

direct access to the *Reichskommissar*, she was in high demand. The other group had passed her a vial of poison, in the hope she might slip it into the Nazi's food. The problem was that Kube's children tended to eat earlier in the evening, meaning that if she put the poison into the soup pot during the day, the alarm would be raised before Kube and his wife ate. The plan was eventually discarded. Now an unknown man in a Nazi uniform had appeared, and Elena was wary of his manner. She worried Nikolai could be a Gestapo agent sent to test her. Her nerves were steadied when a friend of hers, a cook who had expressed willingness to join the resistance, was enlisted by Nikolai's contacts to vouch for him.

A week later, Nikolai met Elena again, dressed in full German uniform and with a bright pink package under his arm, wrapped as if it were a gift for a lover. Inside were two small magnetic bombs, with pencil detonators and printed instructions. Elena received Nikolai warily, sitting on a stool with hands folded and waiting to hear what he had to say. He revealed the reason for his journey to Minsk. 'In your hands is a rare opportunity to help in a mission that will have a place in the history of the war,' he told her. She protested that she would have nothing to do with such folly, but heard Nikolai out. He told her there were two options: She could give him precise information about Kube's movements, and assist in getting him and others into the grounds of Kube's villa, where they would ambush him with a grenade. There was also the second plan.

'There is a little contraption called a magnetic bomb. A small, inconspicuous box, which clamps tenaciously to any object made of iron, even to the springs of the Gauleiter's bed,' he said. He explained how the pencil detonator could be set so as to programme the bomb to go off at a particular time.

'I don't know, Comrade,' said Elena. But with her use of that final word Nikolai was sure she had made up her mind. He bade her farewell and left her the gift-wrapped package with the bomb.[11]

On 21 September, Elena rose at six thirty. After pacing around her apartment and running through all eventualities in her head over and over, she placed the bomb in her handbag and walked to work. She also took with her the unused vial of poison, resolving to swallow it if captured. When she arrived at the mansion, she made her way upstairs.

She was only permitted to be on the second floor, which housed Wildenstein's suite as well as Kube's office and guest bedrooms. Kube's bedroom and the dining area on the first floor were strictly out of bounds.

Elena began cleaning Kube's quarters, emptying the ashtrays and removing the whisky glasses left from the previous night. Both Wildenstein and Kube headed out. Elena nodded hello to Kube's wife Anita and said she had a toothache, asking permission to visit the dentist later in the day should it get worse. Shortly after, Anita went out to run some errands, taking one of the servants with her. This left just Elena and one other young servant, Yanina, in the house. Elena knew Yanina had a secret German lover, so she beckoned her over and whispered that because the house was empty, Yanina could sneak up to the second floor and call him from the telephone in Kube's office. The girl accepted the offer gleefully and bounded up the stairs.

Elena picked up her handbag and a pair of children's trousers and crept down to the first floor. If discovered, she planned to say she was searching for thread to mend the trousers. With her heartbeat sounding in her ears as loudly as a drum, she removed the bomb from her bag, lay on the floor next to the bed, and affixed it to the underside of the mattress. She twisted the pencil detonator to fifteen hours so that it would go off in the middle of the night. She then sat on the bed and gently bounced, to make sure the bomb would not fall. It was a nervous moment, but the device remained in place. Gathering up her bag and the trousers, Elena hurried back out of the room and, seeing Yanina approaching, told her the toothache had become worse and she was going to the dentist immediately.

When she returned home, Elena grabbed her sister Valya, and the pair of them hurried to an agreed pickup point, where a driver with a permit to travel outside Minsk was waiting for them. The sisters jumped into the cargo section of the driver's truck and were tossed around for half an hour until it ground to a halt a dozen miles outside Minsk. There, they jumped out and made their way through the woods to a partisan encampment. At two in the morning, as Kube lay fast asleep in bed with his wife, and Elena and her sister paced nervously at the camp, the bomb detonated as planned. Kube was killed instantly; Anita miraculously survived.

Karl and Nikolai were awoken early in the morning by the son of the cook who had vouched for them to Elena. His cheeks were blazing red, and he spoke in rapid adrenaline-fuelled sentences. Kube was dead, blown to bits in his sleep, he said. The SS were on the hunt for the perpetrators and had blocked all exits from the city. Quickly, Karl and Nikolai donned their uniforms, left the apartment, and flagged down a lorry packed with SS men that was headed for the concentration camp at Trostenets, south of Minsk. The lorry sailed through the army and SS checkpoints on the outskirts of the city, and when it reached a fork in the road, Karl and Nikolai jumped out. Once the vehicle had disappeared into the distance, they left the road and clambered through the forests. That night, they ran into a detachment of partisans, part of a search party sent from the base to look for them. They peeled off their Nazi uniforms and awaited news of when a plane might arrive to take them back across Soviet lines, their mission an unequivocal success.

The Soviet Union sent fifteen thousand operatives across the lines during the war years, Sudoplatov later estimated, and between them they were responsible for the assassination of eighty-seven high-ranking Nazis. Many of these operatives were disguised as Germans. Nikolai Kuznetsov, who posed as Oberleutnant Paul Siebert and killed at least six Nazi officials before he was captured and killed, later became one of the most celebrated Soviet war heroes. The assassination of Kube was perhaps the most spectacular hit of all, so much so that inside the SS and Gestapo there were rumours that it must have been an inside job by a competing faction in the Nazi hierarchy.

For the Soviets, it was a morale-boosting triumph. ‘For two years, mad wolves have tormented our motherland,’ wrote the journalist Ilya Ehrenburg, in a newspaper column after the killing. ‘Now the hunt is on. The wolves are being chased down all over.’[12]

9

Early Infiltrations:

The Cold War Begins

The war left twenty-seven million Soviet citizens dead. One-third of the country's pre-war wealth was destroyed, including thirty-two thousand factories and forty thousand miles of railway.[1] The cathartic celebrations of May 1945 were followed by a famine that swept much of the country, along with the realisation of the enormity of the reconstruction effort required.

Stalin could draw some pleasure from the geopolitical situation, however. The war victory had dispelled any lingering doubts about the permanence of the Bolshevik Revolution. The Soviet Union, like it or hate it, was universally accepted as a key part of the emerging world order, with a permanent seat on the Security Council of the soon-to-be-founded United Nations. By the end of 1945, Stalin was the only one of the key wartime leaders still in office, after the death of Roosevelt and Churchill's surprise defeat in an election.

Stalin's ability to negotiate a favourable post-war settlement for the Soviet Union was also helped by the relentless spying to which he subjected his allies. From Britain, the Cambridge Five continued to supply Moscow with classified intelligence at a prodigious rate: Donald Maclean sent hundreds of documents from the Foreign Office, and Anthony Blunt stole more than seventeen hundred documents from MI5 over the course of the war.[2] Kim Philby was put in charge of MI6's new department devoted to countering Soviet espionage, crippling the effort from the start.

In the United States, too, Moscow retained a formidable network of agents. Early in the war, the Centre had sent Iskhak Akhmerov back to New York, realising the absurdity of keeping the illegal with the best connections in America as an intern at Lubyanka. He used a hat and fur shop on West Fifty-Seventh Street as his primary base of operations. The

Soviet role in overcoming Hitler's forces had again cast the country in a positive light, and Iskhak brought some estranged sources back into the fold. He re-established contact with Gerald Graze and Laurence Duggan of the State Department and began handling Nathan Silvermaster, an Odesa-born Treasury official. They met in restaurants or at Leon and Eddie's, a rowdy nightclub on West Fifty-Second Street, where Silvermaster handed over information from a ring of Communist sympathisers in the US government. Silvermaster was convinced he was dealing with a real American, suggesting Iskhak's skill at posing as a native New Yorker had come a long way since the days when Hede Massing dismissed him as a 'Muscovite automaton'.[3]

In March 1943, the Americans had opened a top-secret facility at Los Alamos, New Mexico, where scientists worked on developing a nuclear weapon. The NKVD learned about the so-called Manhattan Project within a month. Before long, there was a network of informers providing Moscow with technical and scientific intelligence, which the Soviets then repurposed for their own atomic programme. Iskhak did not handle these sources directly, but a lot of the intelligence went through him: in 1945 alone, he sent nearly two thousand rolls of microfilm to Moscow.[4]

While Stalin was receiving reams of intelligence reports gathered in Britain and America, neither London nor Washington had a single agent close to power in Moscow. This meant that at the 'Big Three' meetings in Tehran, Yalta and Potsdam, where the fate of post-war Europe was decided, Stalin was much better briefed on his supposed allies than they were on him. When the new US president, Harry Truman, tried to impress Stalin at Potsdam with news that the Americans had acquired 'a new weapon of unusual destructive force', he was confused as to why Stalin appeared unfazed. In fact, Stalin had found out about the bomb much earlier than Truman, who was only inducted into the secret when he was sworn in as president.

The wartime alliance dissolved quickly. Already in March 1946, Churchill spoke of an 'iron curtain' descending across the continent. Through a mix of elections, manipulation and coercion, Stalin ensured that the eastern half of Europe would be firmly under Communist control. He launched a new series of repressions, particularly against those deemed disloyal elements in these new territories. The division of

Germany was formalised, and the Western powers established the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, NATO, a defensive military alliance. To bolster weakened economies and prevent impoverished populations from choosing Communists at the ballot box in countries such as Greece and Italy, the United States launched the Marshall Plan, a huge recovery spending programme for Europe. In theory, it was open to countries in the eastern half of Europe too, but assuming the money would come with political strings attached, Stalin ordered Czechoslovakia and Poland to refuse participation.

A major new arm of America's foreign policy, the Central Intelligence Agency, was set up by the Truman administration in 1947. Like the wartime Office of Strategic Services, America's first dedicated foreign intelligence agency, the CIA was designed not just to gather intelligence but also to plan and execute covert operations. A year later, a top-secret directive laid out some of the potential methods it might employ, including 'propaganda, economic warfare, preventive direct action including sabotage … subversion against hostile states, including assistance to underground resistance movements … and support of indigenous anti-communist elements in threatened countries of the free world'.[5] In practice, this ranged from funding artistic exhibitions and literary ventures aimed at subtly promoting the American way of life, to a secret intervention in the knife-edge 1948 Italian election. The CIA funnelled money to opponents of the Communists, who eventually lost to a conservative coalition. The agency also launched a policy of training exiles from newly Communist nations as guerrilla fighters and sending them back into their homelands to sow discord.

A key moment in the stand-off between the Communist and the capitalist worlds came soon after dawn on 29 August 1949. In a remote part of the Kazakh steppe, a huge white fireball appeared on the horizon, turning orange and then red as it rose toward the sky, followed by a mushrooming cloud of debris. Shock waves arrived at the observation bunker six miles away with the roar of an avalanche as Soviet scientists and their political minders hugged each other jubilantly. Four years after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Soviets had broken the American nuclear monopoly. Brilliant scientific brains, the fruits of Gulag labour and – most significantly – information stolen from the American programme, had made this breakthrough possible. By the end of 1950, the United

States had more than three hundred operational atomic bombs, while the Soviet Union had only five. But the fundamental principle underpinning the Cold War, whereby one side would never be able to launch a nuclear attack on the other without risking the decimation of the whole planet, was in place.[6]

Inside America, fear mounted over Communism's potential as a subversive ideology. At the end of 1945, Elizabeth Bentley, a Soviet intelligence courier handled by Iskhak Akhmerov, went to the FBI and reported dozens of people she accused of passing information to Moscow, including top government officials. Although she did not know Iskhak's real name or address, the Centre felt obliged to recall him to Moscow for safety reasons. Bentley's evidence further convinced the FBI director, J. Edgar Hoover, that Communism was an existential threat to the country. 'Communism, in reality, is not a political party,' he told Congress in March 1947. 'It is a way of life, a malignant and evil way of life. It reveals a condition akin to disease that spreads like an epidemic, and like an epidemic, a quarantine is necessary to keep it from infecting the nation.'

Under pressure from Hoover, President Truman signed an executive order launching the Federal Loyalty and Security Program. This law allowed the FBI to run background checks on more than two million government employees, as well as to carry out deeper investigations into the personal lives and political beliefs of more than four thousand. Fighting the supposed Soviet threat became an unhealthy obsession for Hoover: at one point he claimed millions of children were training as parachutists in the Soviet Union, which intended to launch a 'large-scale attack of suicide paratroopers carrying small bombs'.[7] His anti-Communist quest would soon be picked up by Senator Joseph McCarthy, who was determined to drive out 'Reds' from all walks of American life.

Much of this was based on paranoid fantasy, but it was true that until now Soviet spies had operated with relative ease in America. The Red Scare would put an end to that. The FBI expanded dramatically during the war years, growing from 2,280 to 15,000 employees between 1941 and 1945.[8] During the later stages of the war, Julius Rosenberg, an army engineer with Communist leanings, had been able to meet more than fifty times with his Soviet handler, Alexander Feklisov, posted in New York

under diplomatic cover. The pair would chat in restaurants or arrange the handover of documents in dark cinema halls. Rosenberg was arrested in 1950 and sent to the electric chair together with his wife, Ethel, in 1953; by then, it was unthinkable that a Soviet legal officer would casually stroll into a restaurant to meet a sensitive agent like Rosenberg. All Soviet intelligence officers knew they would be subjected to intensive surveillance the minute they stepped out of the embassy.[9]

To compensate, the Centre drew up a plan to create a new network of illegals in the West. The plan had three main benefits, the Centre believed. First, illegals would be able to move around without being subject to the surveillance that was now a way of life for spies working under diplomatic cover. Second, they could work using a 'false flag', duping targets who were not leftists into thinking they were working for a different country or cause altogether. Finally, if the Cold War ever intensified to the point that diplomatic relations were cut and the Soviet embassy closed, illegals could be left in situ and ready to act.

But where to find these new operatives? By 1946, the Soviet Union had just twenty-four remaining illegals, stationed in twelve countries, and many of them had ceased to be active. With Iskhak's recall, there were no illegals in the United States at all. To remedy this, in 1947 a special department was set up at Lubyanka to select, train and document new cadres. It was headed by Alexander Korotkov, who had operated in Berlin and sent warnings of Hitler's plans on the eve of the invasion. By 1949, Korotkov had recruited forty-nine new illegals. Gradually, the Centre began sending them abroad.[10] Korotkov understood that the new Cold War conditions required a change of tactics; no longer could illegals operate in the West as Iskhak had before the war. These days, a man calling himself Michael Green who spoke with clipped Slavic consonants and set up meetings with US government employees was likely to come to the attention of the FBI very quickly. To withstand the increased vigilance, the new illegal would need to be equipped with a watertight cover story and receive thorough training.

In March 1950, a man named Ivan Kovalik left the Polish port of Gdynia on a steamer bound for New York. His real name was Valery Makayev, and he was one of the first post-war illegals dispatched to the United States. The Centre had trained Makayev full-time for seven

months to ensure he could play the role of Kovalik, a Chicago-born man of Ukrainian origin. The real Kovalik had emigrated as a child and settled first in Poland, and then the Soviet Union, where the illegals department acquired his out-of-date American passport and doctored it to add Makayev's photograph. With the help of a corrupt clerk at the American embassy in Warsaw, Makayev renewed Kovalik's old US passport. He received long hours of English and Polish tuition and met with Iskhak to discuss life in America. He picked up the languages easily, though admitted to his trainers he was scared he might speak Russian in his sleep and give himself away.

The Centre's idea was that Makayev would run an 'illegal residency' that would include two further Soviet illegals, one posing as an Austrian and the other posing as a Finn. They would create a parallel network to the legal residency operating out of the Soviet embassy. Later, the Centre planned other illegal residencies in the United States. Each would be run directly from Moscow, and no residency would have knowledge of the others, to boost operational security.

The Centre gave Makayev $25,000 in cash, a huge amount at the time, and assigned him his first major task: to act as controller for Kim Philby, who by now was Moscow's most valued agent.[11] Philby had been posted to Washington as the head of the MI6 liaison office in 1949, giving him total insight into US plans to prepare anti-Communist groups for infiltration missions into Eastern bloc countries. The Soviets, armed with Philby's information, were able to ensure that none of those missions were successful. Philby had cut off all in-person contact with Soviet diplomats, worrying it could draw the attention of the FBI. He passed intelligence to Moscow via his friend and fellow Soviet agent Guy Burgess, who was not the most reliable courier, because he was often blind drunk. Makayev's role was to re-establish direct contact in a way that would not require Philby to meet anyone known to have Soviet or Communist links.

After he arrived in America, Makayev discarded the instructions he had received in training. A talented musician, he found himself a job teaching composition at New York University. He met, and fell in love with, a Polish ballerina, becoming more focused on winning her heart than he was on handling the agents assigned to him. He spent most of the funds meant for operational purposes on purchasing lavish gifts for her.

The new Cold War conditions meant illegals had no contact whatsoever with the Soviet embassy, so the Centre had no way of knowing that Makayev had gone off the rails.

In the spring of 1951, thanks to his unparalleled access to CIA and FBI secrets, Philby realised the Americans were getting very close to uncovering that the Foreign Office diplomat Donald Maclean, Philby's old friend, was a Soviet spy. Philby told Burgess to warn Maclean in May 1951, and both of them fled Britain, resurfacing in the Soviet Union. Philby knew he would inevitably fall under suspicion too: all three men had studied together at Cambridge, and the unstable Burgess had been his houseguest in Washington just a few weeks previously.

This was where Philby's new illegal controller should have stepped in. Makayev was meant to retrieve $2,000 from a dead drop location in New York and deliver the cash to Philby. Then, if Philby sensed the net was closing in, he would take the money and travel on false papers to Mexico or the Caribbean, from where the Soviets would exfiltrate him to Moscow. But when the time came for Makayev to retrieve the money, he was unable to find the dead drop, and Philby never received it. Philby had perhaps decided to tough out the storm, in any case, but he now had no other choice. Amid mounting suspicion that he was the 'Third Man' in the Burgess–Maclean spy ring, he returned to London when summoned in June 1951. He resigned from MI6 to pre-empt dismissal, and although he avoided arrest, he no longer had access to government secrets.

Makayev was recalled to Moscow, where he was met with a frosty reception and reprimanded for a lack of discipline as well as for mislaying operational funds. According to one account, he developed a heart condition soon after and died on the operating table.[12]

A few months after Makayev's recall, at the beginning of November 1951, the *Nea Hellas*, a Greek ship that had sailed from Marseilles, docked in Halifax, Canada. Among the passengers was Evgeny Brik, a freshly trained illegal who was carrying a Canadian passport in the name of Ivan Hladysh and a hollowed-out coin containing microfilms with details of the locations and timings of future meetings. Two weeks later, in the Montreal Botanical Garden, Brik met a Soviet spy posted under diplomatic cover to the embassy in Ottawa. He handed the man his

passport and received a birth certificate in a new name, David Soboloff, and a thick wad of Canadian dollars.[13]

Brik had been given two years of training before his departure, mostly in espionage tradecraft. He already spoke native English from several years of schooling in New York, where his father had worked for the Soviet trade mission. He bade a tearful goodbye to his wife, Antonina, in Moscow, promising he would return before long. There would be no espionage demands made of him in the first stage of his deployment. He was simply to take a tour of Canadian cities where 'Soboloff' had supposedly lived at various points in his life and to memorise buildings and details so that later he could tell convincing stories about his 'early years'. The plan was for him to acquire a Canadian passport and then find a pretext to engineer a move to the United States. Sending illegals to the United States through Canada or Latin America was a new strategy devised by the Centre to help ease the adaptation period. Operatives could perfect their cover in less hostile surroundings and then be infiltrated into the United States when the time was right, and when they had proved themselves able to handle the pressure of living under a false identity. In the meantime, the Centre handed Brik control of five Canadian agents recruited by legal officers in the embassy.

Brik struggled to adapt to life as Soboloff, feeling overwhelmed and lonely. During an early visit to Winnipeg, one of his supposed old haunts, he ended up in bed with Larissa, the married daughter of his guesthouse owners. Within a few days he told her he had fallen in love and said he wanted to spend the rest of his life with her. Larissa was stuck in a miserable marriage to a Canadian army officer and was glad of the attention. Her enthusiastic suitor was charming and funny and gave no hint that he was actually a Soviet citizen with a wife waiting back in Moscow. Some months later, she did what he had been begging her to do and left her husband.

Brik was so overcome with emotion that he confessed everything about his real identity and mission to Larissa. Aghast, she insisted he go to the authorities and repeat his confession. After some argument, Brik agreed, determined to make it work out with Larissa. This set in train a disastrous series of events. The Canadians realised they had an excellent opportunity: to run a Soviet illegal as a double agent. They persuaded Brik to carry on working for Soviet intelligence while they kept watch so

they could learn how the illegals programme operated. They also arranged for Larissa and her husband to be sent to the far north of Canada. Brik never saw her again. His mood darkened, and he began drinking heavily, but he agreed to continue his communications with Moscow as normal.

In 1955, the time came for Brik to visit Moscow after four years in the field, to see both his handlers at the Centre and his wife. Hungry for information from inside Lubyanka, the Canadians told him to take the trip, promising that on his return he could finally cut links with Soviet intelligence and be resettled in Canada with a new identity. After a circuitous route via Rio de Janeiro, Paris, Brussels, Helsinki and Leningrad, Brik landed in Moscow. He was arrested on the tarmac by waiting intelligence officers and driven to Lubyanka, where he was interrogated at length and eventually sentenced to fifteen years in prison.[14] It turned out that an indebted Canadian intelligence officer had contacted the Soviet embassy in Ottawa and offered information for cash, including the news that an illegal operating in Canada had been turned.

Brik and Makayev had come unstuck not due to brilliant counterintelligence work but because neither man could handle the pressures of a double life. There would be more, similar failures over time. These eventually led to a total overhaul of the way the Centre created and dispatched illegals, but the realisation of how much needed to change only came gradually. This was partly because alongside all these failures there was one remarkable success, a mission that seemed to prove that the era of the great, flamboyant illegals was not yet over.

10

Signor Ambasciatore:

The Mission to Kill Tito

On the morning of 27 April 1953, Josip Broz Tito received the Costa Rican diplomat Teodoro Castro in a simply furnished room at the White Palace in Belgrade. Tito, the leader of Yugoslavia's wartime Communist partisans, had taken over government at the end of the war and now wielded supreme power. He was the president, the prime minister, marshal of the army, and godfather to every ninth child born in the country.[1] He was also Stalin's biggest headache in the Communist bloc, having publicly split with the Soviet leader in 1948 and announced that Yugoslavia would follow its own political course.

For Tito, the meeting with Castro was one more small step in a plan to forge new alliances across the globe and cement Yugoslavia's status as a Communist power independent from Moscow. The charming diplomat, in his late thirties, seemed to understand Tito's predicament intuitively. He explained to the Yugoslav leader that Central American nations were stuck between Moscow-backed Stalinists and Washington-backed dictators. The happy exception was Costa Rica, he said, where a genuine reform movement had emerged after a 1948 revolution and the country was working hard to maintain a neutral path. With a diplomat's suave flattery, Castro extolled Tito as a role model for a non-aligned leader. Tito had become extremely popular in Costa Rica and indeed across the region, he said. He also hinted at rich trading opportunities: Costa Rica could sell Belgrade the best coffee and cocoa in the world, and in return it would buy cement and industrial machinery.

The pair chatted in English, with a translator occasionally stepping in when Tito needed help with a word. Both men sucked at pipes with a cigarette tucked vertically into the end, Tito's trademark smoking style, which his visitor aped out of respect. Castro quizzed Tito, asking about his vision for Yugoslavia, and name-dropped his political connections in

Rome and the Vatican. He told several jokes at the expense of Italians. When the good-humoured meeting ended, Tito remarked to his aides that the Costa Rican was likable enough but his silver-tongued flattery was undoubtedly aimed at concluding a favourable trade agreement for his country.[2]

Tito was right to suspect an ulterior motive behind Castro's charm, but it had nothing to do with a trade deal. The man Tito met that morning was a genuine, accredited Costa Rican diplomat, but his real name was not Teodoro Castro and he had never even been to Costa Rica, despite his ability to spin lengthy anecdotes about his supposed homeland. His real name was Iosif Grigulevich, and he was a Soviet illegal, the same one who had posed as the Frenchman 'Felipe', and run the first, unsuccessful attempt to assassinate Trotsky in Mexico City. A few months before this meeting, Stalin had given Grigulevich an important mission: not to sign an economic deal with Tito, but to kill him.

Iosif's unlikely journey from Eastern European revolutionary to Central American ambassador began in the Lithuanian city of Trakai, where he was born in 1913 to a Russian mother and a father who was Karaim, a small ethnic group that practised Judaism. From his father, Romuald, he inherited his sparkling brown eyes and the thick, dark hair that would later help him to pass for a Latino. In 1926, Romuald abandoned his family to pursue a new life in Argentina, and the teenage Iosif responded by throwing himself into the revolutionary underground of Wilno (later Vilnius). Because of that, Iosif was expelled from school and even spent time in jail.

Out of prison but with the police still on his tail, Iosif fled for Warsaw and then Paris, where he met several Polish revolutionaries and possibly also made his first contact with Soviet intelligence.[3] From there, he left for Argentina, where he reconnected with his father, who was now running a pharmacy in the province of Entre Ríos, north of Buenos Aires. He became involved in the Argentinian Communist underground, and within a couple of years he spoke almost flawless Spanish. In 1936, he travelled back to Europe, convinced he could be of use to the Communist cause in the Spanish Civil War. After the Soviets had carried out background checks on his activities in Argentina, he was hired as a translator by the NKVD and gradually entrusted with increasingly

important operations. His file records that he was personally involved in long and likely violent interrogations and the ‘liquidation’ of enemies.

The assassination attempt on Trotsky was a rare mission failure for Iosif, but he pulled off his escape from the scene perfectly. He later moved to Argentina, where, once the war began, he assembled a multinational band of saboteurs, mainly seamen and port workers. This squad developed time-delayed incendiary devices and placed them inside warehouses and aboard ships they believed were being used to transport Chilean fertiliser to Nazi Germany for use in explosives. They also used them to burn down a German bookshop in Buenos Aires that had been selling Nazi literature. Iosif’s KGB file claims his team deployed about 150 of these devices and sank two large German boats.[4]

During his years in Latin America, Iosif passed himself off as Brazilian, French or Argentinian in everyday conversations, depending on the circumstances. He used an array of different papers – among them American, Mexican and Chilean – most of which were forged and often had to be discarded because they were not robust enough for long-term use. But on a visit to Chile in July 1945, he acquired a fully legitimate set of papers that he would use for years to come.

Among the agents Iosif had recruited in Chile was the Costa Rican writer Joaquín Gutiérrez Mangel, who, at the time, was the country’s vice-consul in Santiago. Together, they cooked up a story to impress the ageing consul general. Gutiérrez had read about a Costa Rican landowner and coffee grower who had recently died childless. He suggested Iosif pose as the old man’s son, claiming he had been disowned because he had been born out of wedlock. Years earlier, the story went, he had immigrated to Chile to escape the sad fact that he was unwanted at home. Now that his father was dead, ‘Teodoro Castro Bonnefil’ wanted to rediscover his Costa Rican roots. Gutiérrez vouched for the story’s authenticity to his boss, and before long Iosif had a passport identifying him as Castro, as well as a letter of recommendation from the consul general.[5]

At the end of that year, Iosif married his co-conspirator, the Mexican Communist Laura Aguilar, in Montevideo. Both of them used false names: he was Teodoro Castro; she was Inelia Idalina de Puerto Neves of Uruguay. After their marriage, the Centre ordered the couple to settle in Brazil. They moved to Rio, opened a bookshop, and awaited further

instructions. In 1946, Laura gave birth to a son, José. But the child was born with a heart defect and died six months later, plunging them into depression. Iosif desperately wanted to return home, and the Centre gave the couple permission to travel to the Soviet Union for a break. They sold the bookshop and left Rio in November 1947, telling friends there they were moving to Europe to heal their broken hearts.

Iosif and Laura's arrival in the Soviet capital amid December blizzards was a shock to the system, especially for Laura, who had never left Latin America. She could not get used to the short, dark days, the snow, and the angry glares from strangers, who saw in them a pair of bourgeois foreigners.[6] They realised they had no desire to remain in Moscow for longer than necessary, and the Centre was eager to make use of Iosif. By now, he spoke ten languages and had a watertight fake identity, making him an invaluable asset. After using Iosif on a few short-term missions, Korotkov formed a plan for a new long-term settlement in Rome.

Italy was one of the most hotly contested battlegrounds of the early Cold War. The defeated Axis state was firmly within the Western sphere of influence, but large swathes of the country's impoverished population supported the local Communist movement. A critical election approached. In April 1948, a US State Department adviser warned that 'if Italy goes Red, communism cannot be stopped in Europe'.[7] The Christian Democrats won the vote that year, with rhetorical help from the pope and financial backing from the newly founded CIA, but the local Communist Party retained a strong presence.

Iosif and his wife were told to obtain tourist visas for Italy and then to set about embedding themselves in Rome. Before deployment, Iosif refined his 'legend', the backstory for his cover identity, together with his handlers. Teodoro Castro was born in 1913 in Costa Rica, but relocated to Chile after being disowned by his father. Soon after his thirtieth birthday, already a successful and wealthy businessman in Chile, he decided it was time for a change, obtained a Costa Rican passport, and embarked on a tour of the continent. He met 'Inelia' while on holiday in Uruguay and moved to Brazil with her. Tragedy struck with the death of their infant son, causing Inelia such grief that her health suffered. The couple was forced to seek medical treatment abroad. For the past year,

they had lived in France, in the spas around Clermont-Ferrand, and in Switzerland. They then travelled to Rome to seek the blessings of the Holy Father. Realising the Italian climate suited them, they had decided to stay.[8] It was all complete nonsense, except for the part about their dead son, which fitted handily into the legend. Korotkov was convinced Iosif would have no problems establishing himself with the cover of a businessman. He had the charm, and the Centre would provide start-up capital.

On arrival in Rome, Iosif paid courtesy calls to the main players of the city's Latin American diplomatic and business communities. Through Laura, in her undercover identity, the couple got to know the Uruguayan consul and his wife. Iosif found him to be a tedious and grasping anti-Communist ideologue, but resolved to put up with him due to his excellent connections. The consul facilitated an introduction to Giulio Pacelli, a nephew of Pope Pius XII's who counted among his many roles the position of Costa Rica's representative to the Holy See. Pacelli, whom *Time* magazine called 'a well-known man-about-the-Vatican', would open a lot of doors for Iosif.[9]

Iosif buffed his shoes to an immaculate shine daily; his suits were well tailored and usually augmented with a grey silk tie. His dark hair was carefully brushed back from his large forehead and his moustache neatly trimmed into two tapering triangles. He might have come across as haughty, if not for his eyes, which seemed to dance with playful mischief, and few were immune to his charms. Laura played her part, accompanying him to many meetings and making her own connections among the Latin American community. Month by month, their contact book expanded.

Iosif's big break came in the autumn of 1950, when a group of Costa Rican dignitaries visited Rome as part of a European tour. Among them was José Figueres, the nation's most prominent politician. Figueres had been one of the leaders of the 1948 revolution, spent eighteen months as president of Costa Rica, and then stepped aside. He would be elected for another stint as president in 1953. His priority on this trip was to find new markets for coffee, Costa Rica's main export and a sector in which he had personal holdings. Iosif had carefully studied the speeches of Figueres, to ensure he made a favourable impression in discussions. When they met, he held forth about the coffee market in Italy and

opportunities for Costa Rican businesses to thrive. Figueres quickly took a shine to ‘Teodoro Castro’, and even noted that they were related: Teodoro’s late father had been a distant cousin. Figueres thought his newfound relative was perfectly placed to aid in his commercial ventures, and the delegation departed with an agreement that Iosif would act as their intermediary in Italy. By the end of 1950, with the help of the start-up capital sent by the Centre, Iosif had set up an office on the Piazza Sallustio.

There was no Costa Rican diplomatic representation in Italy; the country’s affairs were handled by Antonio Facio, a diplomat based in Spain. When Facio travelled to Rome with his wife, Iosif managed to leverage his connection with Pacelli and set up a meeting with the pope. This further cemented his prestige in the eyes of the Foreign Ministry, and Facio was particularly touched. His two children had died recently, and the words of comfort that the pope shared meant a lot to him.[10] After his visit, Facio recommended that his charming young compatriot in Rome be given the title of first secretary of the Costa Rican mission.

In July 1951, Iosif wrote a long dispatch to the Costa Rican Foreign Ministry, explaining he was grateful and moved by Facio’s offer to represent his country. ‘Serving the motherland under your illustrious direction is the most significant distinction to which a Costa Rican can aspire,’ he wrote. He explained how he had always retained ‘spiritual ties’ with his ‘homeland’, despite living outside it for such a long time. Castro’s letter was shot through with praise for the current government and hints at the economic opportunities he could provide. He noted that each year Italy imported thirty thousand bags of Costa Rican coffee, but that most of it went through Swiss, Dutch or British intermediaries, who pocketed much of the profit. If Costa Rica sold directly, its share of the gains would increase, he explained. Iosif told the ministry that he had already procured diplomatic premises for the Costa Rican legation in ‘a palace at the heart of the city’. He assured the ministry that all the expenses would be shouldered by him personally.

The letter ended with flourish and flattery:

> I await your gracious orders, which will be carried out with accuracy and scrupulousness, and request to convey my most fervent greetings to our illustrious president.

Your obedient servant and faithful friend remains at your disposal,

Teodoro B. Castro
Chargé d'Affaires Ad Interim
Rome, July 7, 1951[11]

Soon after, a Costa Rican diplomatic passport arrived for Teodoro Castro and his wife; their photographs were pasted onto the page and branded with the Foreign Ministry's official stamp.

It was just a year since Iosif had arrived in Rome, knowing no one. He had played his role spectacularly well. An evaluation by the Centre had the following to say: 'He's pleasant looking, has extravagant tastes, is always carefully and nicely dressed, is generous, can hold a conversation on any topic, and can tell funny jokes or stories that he often invents on the spot. This makes it easy for him to connect with people and makes him an excellent recruiter, either by persuading people to cooperate or using people without them even knowing.'[12]

If necessary, as he had proved more than once over the years, Iosif was also willing to shoot them in the back of the head.

The four years Iosif spent in Rome were a time of transition as the city eased its way out of the grim post-war depression and morphed into the glamorous home of the *dolce vita*, drawing film stars and tourists from across the world. *Roman Holiday*, starring Audrey Hepburn and Gregory Peck, was the first American film to be shot entirely in Italy, in 1952, and it kick-started a trend. The magazine *Le ore* began running a weekly front page featuring a shot snapped by one of the many photographers who camped out on the Via Veneto waiting for the latest Hollywood celebrity to appear.[13]

Not all the Hollywood presence in Rome was quite what it seemed. A year before Iosif arrived, the film producer Michael Burke moved to the city with his family, bringing a magnetic charm and a stack of business cards identifying himself as the head of Imperial Pictures. In fact, Burke was part of the newly founded CIA, working under deep cover. As the Cold War became more entrenched, the resources lavished on the CIA rose sharply. Between 1949 and 1952, the budget for the agency's covert action wing grew from $4.7 million to $82 million.[14]

Burke moved into the top floor of a luxurious mansion near the Borghese Gardens and announced he was looking to crack the Italian film market, but in the evenings he scurried to a secret CIA apartment out in the suburbs. There he met with the leaders of an Albanian guerrilla force the CIA planned to drop into the newly Communist state across the Adriatic.

It is highly likely that Iosif and Burke attended many of the same events on Rome's diplomatic circuit, a carousel of luncheons, cocktails and soirées. Iosif ensured Teodoro Castro was on everybody's invite list by himself hosting a party. On 15 September 1951, Costa Rica's Independence Day, he rented out a large hall at the luxurious Grande Albergo hotel. Nearly five hundred guests attended, including most of Rome's diplomatic corps and numerous Italian cultural luminaries. In a missive to San José, the diplomat noted that it had been a patriotic honour for him to cover the $600 in expenses for the hire of the hall and the free-flowing champagne, whisky and cognac.[15] His Foreign Ministry bosses were delighted at his largesse, unaware that it was all funded by the Soviet state.

Soon after, Iosif, in his guise as Castro, began negotiations among his business and political contacts to set up a direct shipping line between Italy and Costa Rica. For his efforts, the Italian prime minister, Alcide De Gasperi, gifted him a camera, engraved with the caption 'As a token of friendship.' It is still on display in the employees-only museum of modern Russia's spy service.[16]

In November, Iosif was invited to be part of the Costa Rican delegation to the sixth session of the United Nations, held at the Palais de Chaillot in Paris. While there, he helped draft a speech for Jorge Martinez Moreno, secretary of the Costa Rican presidency. The session was attended by the US secretary of state, Dean Acheson, while the Soviet delegation was headed by Andrei Vyshinsky, the foreign minister, who was less than impressed by the Costa Rican delegation, thinking them to be American lapdogs. He had no idea that one of their party was a Soviet illegal.[17]

During that UN session, Iosif was invited to the Yugoslav embassy in Paris, where the topic of formalising diplomatic links between Costa Rica and Yugoslavia was raised. This was music to Iosif's ears; he declared he would be more than willing to add the renegade Communist nation to his

ambassadorial portfolio. The foreign ministries of both countries agreed to consider the question.[18]

Teodoro Castro was getting a reputation as one of the most impressive faces of the Central American nation's small diplomatic corps. In the spring of 1952, Laura travelled to Costa Rica, where in meetings with the political elite she tactfully suggested that it might be wise to raise her husband in diplomatic rank. The ministry was in agreement that their new envoy to Rome had exceeded all expectations, and promoted him to extraordinary envoy and minister plenipotentiary, a full ambassadorial rank. On 14 May, Teodoro Castro was called to present his credentials to the Italian president, Luigi Einaudi. He readied a consignment of the finest Costa Rican coffee as a gift. A luxurious Fiat 2800 from the presidential palace arrived at the embassy, now housed in a suite of rooms on the ground floor of a building on Viale Bruno Buozzi. A chauffeur opened the back door of the car for Iosif, who was dressed for the occasion in striped grey trousers, a black waistcoat and tailored tails. Accompanied by six motorcycle outriders, the car travelled to the Quirinale, where in the courtyard ceremonial trumpets played to mark Castro's arrival. He was escorted up the staircase, past a guard of honour, and into the Hall of Augustus, a long room with marble floors and grand chandeliers.[19]

The newly accredited ambassador had two very different masters. During this period, he sent short reports to San José about his diplomatic successes, and longer messages to Moscow containing information about new contacts and observations on Italian politics and the Vatican. The reports were either written in code and left at dead drops across the city, for a legal operative to collect and forward to Moscow, or delivered in person in Vienna, where either Iosif or Laura travelled once a month to meet with a representative from the Centre.[20]

In time, though, combining the work of an active intelligence officer with that of an ambassador became taxing even for Iosif. To help bear the load, he sent for Pascal Rocca, who had been his main wartime assistant in Uruguay, and appointed him a secretary in the embassy. All three people working in the Costa Rican embassy – Iosif, Laura and Rocca – were now Soviet agents. Iosif used Rocca as a courier, to take messages back and forth to Vienna; his other useful function was to sit in the

embassy reception and filter out visitors who might recognise Iosif and blow his cover.[21]

The Centre worried that this kind of unmasking was becoming more likely, noting just how much the illegal seemed to be enjoying his role as Costa Rican man-about-town. There was particular concern over news that ‘Teodoro Castro’ had commenced a series of public lectures on the history of Latin America. If someone who had known Iosif in Lithuania, Argentina, Mexico or Spain recognised him in his new identity, he would be in serious trouble. The Centre ordered Iosif to keep a lower profile and to minimise espionage-related meetings. If Moscow needed to schedule an emergency meeting with him, someone would call the embassy between 10 and 11 p.m. and request an appointment for a ‘Signor Martin’. This would be a signal that the next day a meeting would take place at 8 p.m. outside the Pantheon. Or a chalk mark would be left on a fruit stand a few minutes’ walk from the embassy, on the Piazza Don Minzoni, a spot Iosif or Laura checked once every ten days. Otherwise, Iosif was to spend as much of his time as possible living the life of the Costa Rican ambassador Teodoro Castro.

His primary preoccupation was the issue of establishing diplomatic relations between Costa Rica and Yugoslavia. The question of what to do with Tito was one of the most vexing for Moscow’s foreign policy. Unlike most of the rest of the new Communist bloc, Tito had come to power without Moscow’s help after World War II, which led him to believe he should have more leeway to make decisions independently of Moscow. Stalin found this unacceptable, and the stand-off intensified. A formal separation between Yugoslavia and the rest of the Soviet bloc became public in dramatic fashion in the summer of 1948. All diplomatic and trade relations were severed, and the Yugoslav Communist Party was described in the Soviet press as being ‘in the hands of killers and spies’. Tito positioned himself as a neutral player in the Cold War, and dignitaries from the West began to make tentative voyages to Belgrade.

Stalin stopped short of invasion, worried about sparking a war in Europe just when tensions were flaring in Korea, but mulled various plans for eliminating Tito. The Yugoslav leader proved to be a ruthless adversary, however. In 1949, he wrote an angry letter to Moscow: ‘Stalin: stop sending people to kill me. We’ve already captured five of them, one with a bomb and another with a rifle … If you don’t stop sending killers,

I'll send one to Moscow.'[22] He also purged thousands of Stalinists from the Yugoslav party, sending many to labour camps. A Communist nation in Europe that ignored Stalin's authority, while simultaneously courting the capitalist world, could set a dangerous example to the other Eastern European states. Stalin was livid, but powerless to act.

On his diplomatic rounds in Rome, Teodoro Castro got to know Vladimir Velebit, the Yugoslav ambassador to Italy. Velebit, a tall and dapper man, had long been a member of Tito's inner circle and had spent much of the war under a false identity in the partisan movement. He could not have imagined that his new friend, the Costa Rican ambassador, had a similar past. Velebit enjoyed Iosif's company and invited him and his wife to at least one dinner at the embassy with visiting Yugoslav officials and Western European diplomats.[23] Velebit also had his own secrets, having travelled to Washington in 1950 to broker a secret partnership between Yugoslav intelligence and the CIA. The Americans offered to aid the Yugoslavs with 'psychological warfare', and they set up an early warning communications system that the Yugoslavs could use in case of a Soviet attack.[24]

The well-connected Velebit helped Iosif set up meetings in Belgrade ahead of a visit in July 1952. Iosif was nervous about the journey; he had met several Yugoslav Communists when he was fighting for the Soviets in the Spanish Civil War, and he was worried he might run into them in the corridors of government in Belgrade, but he decided the risk was worth taking. With no Soviet embassy in Belgrade, the access would be priceless for the Centre. The meetings went well, and the Yugoslav authorities invited Teodoro Castro back to Belgrade to formalise relations and discuss particulars for a trade deal.[25] He returned on the same day that the British foreign secretary, Anthony Eden, was in town, a sign of how rapidly Tito was negotiating his way out of Stalin's embrace. Eden, during that trip, extended a half-hearted invitation for Tito to visit Britain. To some surprise, the Yugoslav leader accepted a few months later.[26]

Tito also invited Teodoro Castro, along with several other ambassadors and dignitaries in Belgrade, to a reception in the White Palace on 18 September. There, Iosif exchanged brief small talk with

Tito, who asked how he liked Belgrade. He replied that it reminded him of his home city of San José, except for the lack of volcanoes.

'We don't have volcanoes but we do have earthquakes,' replied Tito, before moving on to shake the next hand waiting for him.

Iosif sent a long message back to Moscow detailing his meeting with Tito and the rest of his visit. Rather than simply rattle off facts, he indulged his colourful writing style, with long descriptive sentences. He noted Tito's dark and bulging eyes, his military uniform, his sizeable paunch, and his shiny shoes. He informed Moscow that Belgrade bookshops stocked numerous works by Trotsky, but no books by Soviet authors. He also reported that two young, attractive women had visited him in his hotel room asking if he needed a translator or secretary, a transparent attempt at a honey trap by his hosts. Finally, he sent quotations and descriptions of the political leanings of various Yugoslav politicians, which were drafted into briefings for the cabinet of ministers in Moscow, with all references to the source of the information removed.[27]

Back in Rome, Teodoro Castro continued with life on the diplomatic circuit. On 21 December, he hosted a Pan-American lunch attended by the American ambassador and a powerful cardinal, among others. Castro made a toast, expressing 'the hope that humanity will enjoy the peace and well-being it longs for in the year to come'. In the next room, an orchestra played for the guests. In his report back to Costa Rica, Castro paid tribute to his second secretary, Pascal Rocca, for organising the lunch, noting that the guests were served a sumptuous meal of shrimp pilaf, stuffed duck and *savarin à la Parisienne*. It was a clever way to ensure that his fellow Soviet agent also gained credit in the eyes of the Costa Rican Foreign Ministry.[28]

At the beginning of February 1953, a month before Tito's planned visit to London, Iosif was called to an urgent meeting in Vienna. Tito's overtures to the West were spiralling out of control. Stalin had put his plans to assassinate Tito on ice for a while, but when Iosif's reports began landing on desks in Moscow, cogs had started to turn in the Soviet intelligence machine. Accounts vary on whether Iosif enthusiastically helped cook up the details of the plot, or whether he was horrified at the thought of what sounded a lot like a suicide mission. But after the

meeting in Vienna, a top-secret document was drawn up by hand, offering suggestions on how Iosif might eliminate Tito.

The document, which referred to Iosif by his code name Max, outlined four options for the hit. All were audacious in the extreme, but the first was the most dramatic: ‘Order Max to arrange a private audience with Tito, during which a soundless mechanism concealed in his clothes would release a dose of pulmonary plague bacteria that would guarantee death to Tito and all present. Max himself would not be informed of the substance’s nature, but with the goal of saving Max’s life, he would be given an anti-plague serum in advance,’ read the document.[29] A secret Soviet laboratory had managed to develop a powdered version of plague in the late 1940s. By the time anyone realised they had been attacked, the pre-vaccinated assassin would have fled the scene.[30]

The second option was for Iosif to use his friendly relations with the former Yugoslav ambassador in Italy, Velebit, who had just been posted to London and was organising Tito’s upcoming visit to Britain. Castro could obtain an invite to a diplomatic reception for Tito in London and kill him there. ‘The terrorist act could be accomplished by shooting with a silent mechanism concealed as a personal item, while simultaneously releasing tear gas to create panic among the crowd, allowing Max to escape and cover up all traces,’ the document suggested, somewhat optimistically. The third option was the same as the second, but to be carried out during a meeting of the diplomatic corps in Belgrade, while the fourth option was to give Tito a gift in a jewellery box, which would release a deadly poison when opened. In all cases, Iosif was to write a letter from Teodoro Castro to his wife, bidding her farewell and explaining that he had carried out the attack because he hated Communism, so that in the event of his capture or death suspicion would not fall on Moscow.

Late in the night of 20 February 1953, Stalin summoned Pavel Sudoplatov, the intelligence boss who had run the mission to kill Trotsky, to his office in the Kremlin. Sudoplatov found the old dictator looking exhausted. His hair had thinned, and he spoke haltingly and with difficulty. Stalin presented Sudoplatov with the handwritten document that set out the options for assassination and asked for his thoughts. Sudoplatov was horrified. The methods suggested were ‘childish and naïve’, he told Stalin. He pointed out that Tito had a long history of

fighting in the partisan movement and would be sure to react calmly and quickly to any attempted attack. The whole plot was dangerously incompetent, he protested. If his account of the exchange is true, it was a remarkably frank way to speak to the ageing tyrant. In any case, Stalin cut him off. The mission should proceed.

Sudoplatov met with several other intelligence bosses and again raised his objections to the plan. He asked them how they could justify a peacetime operation that involved sending an illegal to certain death. But there did not seem to be any other option. When Sudoplatov examined the files on Tito, he was dismayed to see that the Soviets did not have any agents among the leader's entourage or in his government. Tito had purged them all. The group broke up, agreeing to reconvene to discuss final planning a few days later.[31]

In January 1953, Tito had changed the Yugoslav constitution, and he appointed himself president as well as prime minister. Previously, the head of the National Assembly had been the nominal head of state, but now Tito took control of the role officially. As a result, in February all ambassadors accredited in Yugoslavia were asked to present their credentials again, to the new head of state. Castro, along with the other ambassadors of Latin American countries, was given a date in April for the ceremony. The timing could not have been better: Iosif did not need to beg for a meeting with Tito; he was being offered one. This was likely to be his big chance.

It is hard to know what was going through Iosif's head at this time and how he and Laura talked about the impending mission. Both halves of the couple had served the Soviet cause with unquestioning devotion, and Iosif was experienced in assassination. But some years had passed since he was last involved in such dirty work. In the interim, he had got used to the charmed life of a diplomat. Now he was being asked to give it all up. The best he could hope for was the fate of Trotsky's assassin, Ramón Mercader, who was still rotting in a Mexican prison more than a decade later. Moreover, Trotsky was an exiled revolutionary; assassinating a head of state was quite another matter. The insistence that he write a letter to his wife was a sign that the Centre knew it was most likely sending him to his death.

Iosif waited patiently for word on which of the assassination options had been chosen. When news did arrive from Moscow, however, it was not in the form of a coded message. Instead, it was splashed on the front pages of all the Italian newspapers, the talk of Rome and indeed the whole world. As Soviet radio relayed it: ‘The heart of Lenin’s comrade-in-arms and the inspired continuer of Lenin’s cause, the wise leader and teacher of the Communist Party and the Soviet people, has stopped beating.’

Just nine days after his meeting with Sudoplatov in the Kremlin, Stalin was found semi-conscious, in a pool of his own urine, at his dacha outside Moscow. Four days later, he died. Loudspeakers in the streets played funeral marches to shocked citizens across the Soviet Union. Party officials and worker collectives across the country paid extravagant tributes to Stalin’s brilliance. These outbursts were overwrought but mostly genuine. Stalin had ruled as supreme leader for a quarter of a century, and his death caused a great outpouring of shock and grief. Long, snaking queues of people, bundled up against the March cold, waited to file past Stalin’s corpse, which lay in repose in the House of Soviets, where some of the first show trials of the 1930s had taken place. On 9 March, an icily cold day with slate-grey skies, Stalin’s coffin was carried to Red Square, where he would be laid to rest in the mausoleum alongside Lenin. Huge crowds jostled to gain access to the square, and hundreds of people were killed in the crush, the dictator’s final victims.

In Rome, the extraordinary envoy and minister plenipotentiary of the Republic of Costa Rica breathed a sigh of relief.

After Stalin’s death, Moscow called off the mission to kill Tito. But Teodoro Castro still had an appointment to keep, so Iosif set off for Belgrade in April 1953 to present his credentials. Instead of bringing a dose of powdered plague, or a poisoned jewellery box, he packed a sack of the finest Costa Rican coffee. He received a forty-minute personal audience with Tito on the morning of 27 April, and a photograph of the encounter was printed on the front page of Costa Rica’s main newspaper.[32] There are three records of the meeting – one in the Yugoslav archives and two written by Iosif, for the Costa Rican Foreign Ministry and for his superiors in Moscow. All emphasise the friendly

nature of the discussion and the planned trade deal that was likely to emerge.[33]

Iosif's focus returned to Italy, where a heated election campaign was under way. The Communists looked set to mount a strong challenge to the ruling Christian Democrats in the June vote. The Vatican entered the fray, announcing that Catholics who backed the Communists would be excommunicated. The election was shaping up to be an important milestone in defining the post-war European order.

In this atmosphere, a new American ambassador arrived in Italy at the end of April. Clare Boothe Luce had been an actress, playwright, journalist and – between 1943 and 1947 – congresswoman. She was married to Henry Luce, the editor in chief of *Time*. She now became the first female American envoy anywhere in the world, rewarded with the Italy post after campaigning for Eisenhower.

On arrival in Rome, Clare Boothe Luce settled into a gruelling routine of luncheons and soirées, some of them hosted at her residence, the sixteenth-century Villa Taverna. Her primary concern was the threat that Communism posed in the upcoming election, and she wrote many missives back to the State Department to that effect.[34] She made a point of avoiding diplomats from the Soviet Union and allied countries. 'I'm not on their social list and they're not on mine,' she said firmly. However, an official schedule preserved in the archives shows that just four days after presenting her credentials to the Italian president, one of her first official visitors was the Costa Rican ambassador Teodoro Castro, who dropped by for a coffee. He met Luce again a fortnight later, at a Pan-American luncheon hosted by the Ecuadorian ambassador.[35] Iosif also remained a regular caller to the Vatican during this time. His contacts with Cardinal Pacelli helped win frequent access to Pius XII, the anti-Communist pope.[36]

Tito, Luce and Pius XII were all entirely inaccessible to Soviet officials or diplomats. Through Iosif, the Kremlin and its spymasters had personal access to all three.

Seven years after the loss of their son, Laura was pregnant again, and the baby, a daughter, was born in June. To the delight of both parents, this time the child was healthy. They called her Romanella, after the city of

her birth, though later her passport would indicate that her name was Nadezhda and that she was born in Moscow. In addition to this welcome personal news, the summer of 1953 saw major political events in all three of the countries with which Iosif was affiliated. In the Italian election, the Communists were defeated again, but they still took 35 per cent of the vote, together with other leftists. ‘Italy is slowly but steadily moving toward the Kremlin,’ a despondent Luce wrote back to Washington, rightly anticipating that the country would continue to be a key Cold War battleground. The next month, in his adopted homeland of Costa Rica, Teodoro Castro’s old friend and business partner José Figueres won the presidential election. Iosif wondered if there might be another promotion in the works for him. If he and Laura moved to Costa Rica for a while, perhaps he could even work his way up to foreign minister.

But the most dramatic news came from Moscow. When Stalin was alive, it had been unthinkable to plan for his succession, so the first weeks after his death saw an uneasy leadership by committee, everyone jockeying for position. The one thing most of the Soviet leadership shared was a fear of the security chief, Beria, and they united to plot his arrest. Charging Beria with any of his real crimes would have implicated others among the elite, so he was instead accused of a plot ‘to revive capitalism and restore the rule of the bourgeoisie’. In December, he was convicted and shot. It was a Stalinist end to the Stalin era.

Iosif suspected that a purge of the intelligence services could follow, and drafted a sycophantic note to the Centre stating that he and Laura agreed with the wise decision of the party to remove Beria. The uncertain news from Moscow added to the couple’s worries, just as they were caring for a newborn child. Navigating daily life in Rome felt increasingly like walking a tightrope. Communist Poland named Jan Druto, whom Iosif knew from his youth in the underground in Wilno, as its ambassador to Rome. It was surely a matter of time before the two ambassadors found themselves at the same event and Iosif’s cover was blown. Other unnerving episodes built up. During a stopover in Milan, Iosif’s suitcase went missing. He decided not to report the theft to the police for fear of causing unwanted enquiries, but he was unsettled by thoughts that it might not be a coincidence. Back in Rome, at a visit to an exhibit of Marc Chagall paintings, when a friend asked if he liked them, he distractedly answered with a crisp ‘*Nyet.*’ Immediately realising his

mistake, he recomposed himself and added with a chuckle, ‘I believe that’s how they say it in the country of the artist’s birth.’

When the orders came to prepare for a return to Moscow, Iosif was relieved, though he could not help wondering if he might be arrested on arrival. Gradually, he laid the groundwork for the couple’s departure. In September, he sent a cable to the Costa Rican Foreign Ministry, noting that ‘due to a delicate illness’, his wife needed to leave Rome. He requested permission to spend the winter with her in Switzerland. On 5 December, Iosif and Laura left for Vienna and then flew on to Moscow. The Costa Rican Foreign Ministry was left to ponder what might have happened to the country’s ambassador to Italy. They never heard from Teodoro Castro again.

In the months after the fall of Beria, Nikita Khrushchev gradually emerged as the dominant figure among the new leadership. Short, rotund and unpretentious, Khrushchev was a savvy operator who had worked his way up the Soviet system from humble origins. He had been fully complicit in the Stalinist terror of the 1930s as a party boss in Moscow and Ukraine who personally approved thousands of arrests. Nonetheless, as the new leader of the Soviet Union, he ushered in a less violent and more open brand of politics. *The Thaw* – a 1954 novel by the popular Soviet writer Ilya Ehrenburg – lent its title to the period of relative liberalisation that would mark Khrushchev’s rule.

Khrushchev oversaw the reorganisation of the security service, which during the thirty-seven years since the revolution had been known, successively, as the Cheka, the GPU, the OGPU, the NKVD and the MGB. The name it acquired in March 1954 – the Committee on State Security, or KGB for short – would prove more enduring. The newly formed KGB combined functions that in most countries were spread across multiple agencies or ministries: it monitored internal security threats and kept a watchful eye on potential political dissidents, but it was also responsible for securing the long Soviet borders, and it gathered foreign intelligence. The KGB was based at the same building on Lubyanka Square where Meer Trilisser had worked back in the 1920s. Large amounts of space had been added in a postwar reconstruction programme, and the building was now a hulking mustard-coloured monolith.

In June 1954, the Politburo met to discuss how to strengthen the KGB's operations against the United States and its Western allies, deciding that more emphasis should be placed on so-called active measures, including collecting *kompromat* on foreign public figures and using disinformation campaigns. The KGB's leadership also demanded a renewed emphasis on illegal intelligence.[37] The 'special directorate', which handled illegals and later became known simply as Directorate S, drew up plans for its officers to be posted under legal cover to Soviet embassies across the globe. They were to be tasked with obtaining birth certificates, passports and other identity documents for future illegals.

Iosif was the last operative who worked with the flair and intuition of the early Great Illegals. As Directorate S spawned ever more sub-departments and bureaucratic offshoots, the process of training and dispatching illegals became much more regimented. There would no longer be space for the improvisation that had defined Iosif's years in Rome.

Iosif's espionage career ended with his return to Moscow. Far too many people already knew him in his guise as the Costa Rican ambassador for him to take on a new identity abroad. Instead, he embarked on a new life as a Soviet academic specialising in Latin America. Over a three-decade career, he wrote dozens of books, including a biography of the Mexican painter David Siqueiros, which neglected to mention that its author had once led its subject in a failed attempt on Trotsky's life. He told only a few, trusted colleagues anything about his past. Years later, bored of academic work, he pitched an audacious plan to his former bosses in the KGB. An acquaintance from his years in Argentina had now become a leading Latin American politician, and Iosif had learned his plane would be making a transit stop to refuel in the Soviet Union en route to Asia. Iosif suggested he could materialise at the airport and make a cold pitch to recruit his old friend to the Soviet cause during the stopover. The KGB said no, thinking it far too risky.

When he learned of the rejection, Iosif grimaced at the strict rules of the new KGB. 'We used to be romantics … Now you're all such pragmatists,' he said wistfully.[38]

11

The Illegals Go Public:

The Abel Trial and the CIA's First Illegals

The glorious successes of Dmitry Bystrolyotov, Iskhak Akhmerov and Iosif Grigulevich remained unknown to everyone but a few people in the Centre. Western counterintelligence agencies had learned a little about the illegals programme through defectors, but among the wider public in both the West and the Soviet Union, there was no real awareness of the KGB's most prized spies. That all changed on 14 October 1957, when a small, unassuming man with a birdlike face appeared in a Brooklyn courthouse, standing trial in the case known as *United States of America v. Rudolf Ivanovich Abel, also known as 'Mark' and also known as Martin Collins and Emil R. Goldfus et al.* He faced several charges, ranging from conspiracy to remain in the United States without registering as a foreign agent, to conspiracy to transmit military and atomic secrets to the Soviet Union. Four years previously, Ethel and Julius Rosenberg had been sent to the electric chair after being found guilty on the latter charge.

Just ten days before the trial opened, the Soviets had launched Sputnik, the first satellite, causing fears in America that Moscow had pulled ahead in the technology race for the first time. Now, inside the courthouse, a new front in the Cold War was revealed. The story that unfolded, of a man who had lived a quiet and unassuming life in New York for the past decade while all the time working as a deep-cover Soviet agent, captured the public imagination and prompted new fears. How could you spot an illegal? How many more might be out there? Could anyone be trusted?

The man now known as Rudolf Abel had been arrested five months previously. Early one morning, there had been a knock at the door of room 839 at the Latham Hotel on East Twenty-Eighth Street in

Manhattan. Roused from sleep, the man opened the door a crack while still naked, upon which three men barged their way in, flashing FBI identifications. They told him they knew everything about him and suggested it would be in his interest to cooperate. He remained silent, save a request to put on some underwear. Once dressed, he was flown to an interrogation centre in Texas. He admitted he was a Soviet citizen and gave his name as Rudolf Abel, but he flatly denied he was a spy. Instead, he implausibly claimed that he had arrived in the United States of his own volition, having found a large sum of money in the Soviet Union and then used it to buy a forged American passport.

A thorough search of Abel's hotel room as well as an artist's studio he rented on Fulton Street in Brooklyn turned up a rich variety of espionage props that proved his story was nonsense. There was a birth certificate for Emil Robert Goldfus, and another for Martin Collins. Investigators found $6,500 in cash, hollowed-out cufflinks, notebooks filled with scribbled codes, and marked-up maps of areas that housed major US defence facilities. One short pencil had a removable top; inside, there were eighteen tiny frames of film. When enlarged, they revealed a schedule for receiving coded messages by radio for various dates in 1957, complete with times and frequencies, as well as letters from a wife and daughter in Moscow. The frames had been created using a technique called microdots, in which a camera with a microscopic lens captured photographs on high-resolution negatives, producing images not visible to the naked eye.

The man's real name, unknown to the Americans at the time, was William Fisher. Rudolf Abel was the name of one of Fisher's KGB colleagues, which he gave so that when it was made public, the KGB would understand he had been caught. From then on, he would always be known as Abel. He had been born to émigré Russian parents in the British city of Newcastle in 1903 and moved to the Soviet Union in the early 1920s. Having served in a radio battalion of the Red Army during the war, he was recruited into the post-war illegals programme. He was already in his forties, but in the aftermath of the war there were few suitable candidates for recruiters to choose from, and his native English was a valuable commodity. After completing his training, Abel travelled to the United States in 1948 on a temporary, Lithuanian identity, which he discarded on arrival, retrieving a stack of cash and an American birth

certificate in the name of Emil Goldfus from a dead drop in New York.[1] The Centre told Abel he should not risk looking for formal employment, because background enquiries about Goldfus might unravel his cover. Instead, he used his considerable artistic talents to settle into a bohemian life as a painter in Brooklyn.

The Centre handed Abel control of a group of agents in and around the American nuclear programme, with the idea that he would run them through Morris and Lona Cohen, an American Communist couple who would act as couriers. But in 1951 the FBI arrested the Rosenbergs, who had worked with Lona, and the Centre withdrew the Cohens from the country. With McCarthyism in full swing, and the FBI on the lookout for Communists, relying on known Communists as couriers, assistants and intermediaries was now too dangerous. The network was disbanded, and Abel never made any further recruits to replace it.[2] Instead, he lived the quiet life of an artist and was given only occasional espionage tasks. In 1953, he moved into a studio on Fulton Street, not far from the Brooklyn Bridge. He rented the poky top-floor apartment for $35 a month, made friends with several other artists, and produced a steady output of paintings and sketches.

The Centre put Abel in touch with another illegal, whom he knew only by a code name, Vik. This was Reino Hayhanen, who had been born near Leningrad to Finnish parents and was recruited because of his fluency in Finnish. Hayhanen posed as the Idaho-born Eugene Maki, an American Finn. The two illegals met regularly in Brooklyn's Prospect Park and other locations around the city. Abel assigned Hayhanen minor tasks, such as filling and collecting dead drops and locating people of interest to the Centre. He soon realised that his new assistant was incompetent and had a drinking problem. He was convinced that it was only a matter of time before Hayhanen blew both of their covers, and on a visit back to Moscow in 1956 he begged the Centre to recall the Finn.

In April 1957, Abel told Hayhanen he was to return to Moscow for further instructions. Hayhanen was astute enough to figure out that something was not right and while changing planes and passports in Paris, he walked into the US embassy and told them everything. He knew Abel only by his code name, Mark, but in a breach of *konspiratsiya* Abel had on one occasion brought his assistant to the studio on Fulton Street. The FBI searched the apartment while Abel was away, and had it

watched. Spotting Abel there one evening, they followed him back to the hotel in Manhattan. Some weeks later, they made their move.[3]

The trial was held at the Eastern District courthouse, whose Gothic towers by strange coincidence looked right across to Abel's studio. Hayhanen was to be the star witness. The prosecutor hoped that his testimony would prove Abel's guilt beyond doubt and make him the first foreign citizen to be convicted of espionage in the United States in peacetime. The two illegals, brought together one last time in court, were facing contrasting fates: for Abel, the electric chair; for Hayhanen, a new identity in the CIA's witness protection programme. Yet of the two, it was Abel who seemed more at peace. Hayhanen arrived in court wearing dark glasses. His black moustache looked dyed, and his thinning hair was combed back. His handlers had to calibrate the right amount of alcohol to dose him with each morning: not enough and he would not be able to function; too much and he might be incoherent. On the witness stand, he was visibly nervous and seemed on the verge of breaking down.[4]

Abel, meanwhile, gave off a Zen-like aura of self-control. Dressed in a charcoal-grey suit and thin striped tie, he spoke rarely and spent most of the trial sketching portraits of the participants. He declined the chance to testify or call witnesses for his defence, smiling with thinly disguised contempt when his former assistant took the stand. Many observers were impressed by his stoicism and dignified countenance; his court-appointed lawyer James Donovan developed a genuine fondness for his client. But the regime Abel served was never far from the minds of the court, and public opinion was not on his side. 'The threat against civilization, the threat against this country and the whole free world, is inherent in this crime … It is an offense against the whole American people,' the prosecutor asserted as the trial drew to a close. The jury took barely three hours to deliver a unanimous verdict: guilty. The judge spared Abel the electric chair, but sentenced him to thirty years in prison.

The trial made Abel a household name. A *Life* magazine cover story described him as a masterful spy who had 'successfully slipped himself into the stream of American life'. Even though Abel had been caught, the magazine warned, there were bound to be others like him roaming the parks of America undetected.[5] Officially, the Soviet press denied Abel had anything to do with the KGB. But when, in 1960, the American pilot Gary Powers was shot down over the Soviet Union during a

reconnaissance flight, the possibility for an exchange opened up. It took place on a freezing morning in 1962, Abel and Powers walking slowly past each other on Berlin's Glienicke Bridge.[6]

Not long after Abel's trial, on the other side of the Atlantic, British investigators caught the scent of another illegal. The CIA gave MI5 a tip-off that some years earlier an employee of the British embassy in Warsaw, Harry Houghton, might have cooperated with Polish intelligence. Houghton now worked at a British submarine research facility at Portland, on the English Channel. His girlfriend, Ethel Gee, also worked there, and both had access to a potential gold mine of intelligence on Britain's nuclear submarine programme.

MI5 watchers followed Houghton to London and saw him hand over a carrier bag to an unknown contact and collect an envelope in return. MI5 assumed they were dealing with a Polish embassy employee, but when they ran checks on his licence plates, they found the vehicle belonged to a Canadian businessman called Gordon Lonsdale. Lonsdale's company was registered at an address on Wardour Street, in the heart of Soho. Since his arrival in Britain from Canada, five years previously, Lonsdale had set up various businesses selling jukeboxes and vending machines.

MI5 launched a long and expensive surveillance operation to track Lonsdale. A search of the safe-deposit box he kept in a London bank yielded a cigarette lighter with a secret compartment containing tiny onetime pads for decoding radio transmissions. Briefed by the Americans on the Abel case, MI5 began to understand what they were dealing with.

By January 1961, British authorities had seen enough to arrest Lonsdale, Houghton and Gee. They also raided a house in Ruislip that Lonsdale frequently visited, belonging to a pair of antiquarian booksellers. Helen and Peter Kroger had New Zealand passports but told their neighbours they were Canadians. When police entered the house, they found a veritable museum of espionage equipment: radio transmitters, photographic equipment, paper for writing in microdots, and secret compartments stashed with cash and fake passports.

The 'Krogers' were in fact Morris and Lona Cohen, the couple who had worked as couriers for Abel in the early days of his New York residency. By the time of Abel's arrest, they had long fled the United States. They lay low in the Soviet bloc for some years before resurfacing

in London with new identities, acting as the radio and logistical hub for Lonsdale's activities in Britain.

Whenever Lonsdale received information from Houghton, he would rush to Ruislip to copy the documents. The information would then be sent to Moscow by the Cohens' high-speed radio transmitter, or in packages sent to foreign countries along with consignments of antique books. The documents probably included intelligence on the sonar for *Dreadnought*, the first British atomic submarine, as well as information about the secret forays British submarines were making into Soviet territorial waters.

Like Abel, Lonsdale was wholly uncooperative with investigators. 'To any question that you might ask me, my answer is "No." So you need not trouble to ask,' he told investigators. In March 1961, he was sentenced to twenty-five years in jail, still insisting he was Gordon Lonsdale of Canada.

After the sentencing, Charles Elwell, MI5's lead investigator, spent months trying to uncover Lonsdale's real identity and eventually cracked the case. Lonsdale was Konon Molody, born in Moscow in 1922. As a child, Molody had lived with an aunt in California, which accounted for his excellent English. In 1938, he returned to the Soviet Union, serving in a unit of partisans behind enemy lines during the war. After training, he was dispatched to New York, where the initial plan was that he would work as a radio operator for Abel's residency. In 1954, however, he was ordered to London. He arrived in Britain by ship, as Gordon Lonsdale, in March 1955.

Elwell made frequent prison visits to Molody, and a friendly relationship developed between the two, revealed in fascinating case files only declassified in 2019. The pair gradually built up a rapport during long hours spent discussing Communism, life and love. When they finally started talking about the espionage case, Elwell tried to persuade Molody to provide information on his background, his training, and his knowledge of the KGB. He hinted that in this case a deal might be made to reduce Molody's sentence or even to set him free. Molody initially told Elwell that he could not accept a deal, because he wanted to see his children in Moscow again, but he started to sound amenable to some kind of agreement, and he was curious what Elwell was willing to offer. He

told Elwell there was a 50 per cent chance he would be shot if he went back.

Elwell was hopeful a deal could be put together to offer Molody a new life in Britain in return for cooperation, but it was decided that public opinion would not approve. The prison conversations ended. In the autumn of 1962, the Soviets arrested and jailed the British businessman Greville Wynne, who was acting as an MI6 courier in Moscow, and by April 1964 another spy swap had been arranged. As Molody was driven from prison to the airfield where he was to board a plane to Berlin, his usual jovial countenance slipped for a moment. 'I wonder how it will all end,' he mused solemnly.[7]

The Abel and Molody trials were a wake-up call for Western intelligence agencies. They wondered how it would be possible to sniff out other illegals, and marvelled at the ingenuity of the Soviet programme. 'I wish we had three or four just like him in Moscow right now,' the CIA director, Allen Dulles, said, privately, after Abel's arrest. Dulles knew how hard it was to create illegals, because he was just in the process of winding down a CIA programme to create its own illegals. In the early 1950s, the agency had teamed up with NTS, an organisation of émigré Russians who wanted to bring down Soviet power, to train operatives for infiltration into the Soviet Union, a longer-term extension of the CIA missions to train guerrilla fighters to be infiltrated into Albania, Romania and other locations in Eastern Europe. NTS was a marginal organisation, but the CIA believed it provided the most promising option for partnering on work against Moscow.[8] American operatives worked together with NTS to identify Russian and Ukrainian exiles who might be up to the task of clandestine work inside the Soviet Union. The selected men were given new identities, to make sure they would not show up on any Soviet watch lists.

The CIA acquired a former hotel with fifteen rooms, located in a secluded clearing on a lake near the German–Austrian border, and turned it into a secret training base. The CIA illegals were all native Russian speakers, so they did not need to acquire the language skills that their Soviet counterparts had to master for work in the West, but they still required an intense training programme in the basics of working undercover. The six-month course included long hours of learning how to

communicate in code, parachute training for the moment of infiltration, and a detailed primer on life in the Soviet Union, covering aspects that the émigrés might have missed since they left. There was also a focus on self-defence and physical fitness, with training in hand-to-hand combat and long runs each morning before breakfast.[9] After being dropped in the forests of Soviet Belarus, the men were to head for big cities, legalise themselves, and send back information about life in the Soviet Union. They would later be used to drum up support for partisan warfare against the Soviet regime. Additionally, each illegal would carry an emergency cache that he would immediately bury in the forest close to the drop site, consisting of a spare radio, weapons, emergency rations and a medical kit. They could then dig it up in the event of a hot war, during which the CIA envisioned them playing a key role after retreating into the forests. 'They can either organize their own black bases or join with already existing partisan groups as radio operators,' read the hopelessly optimistic CIA plans.[10] The men were given a stash of gold coins to help recruit hypothetical local members of these partisan groups, and CIA forgers also drew up documents supposedly from Soviet authorities, identifying the men as Soviet security agents on a secret mission who should be given all help required. The trainers admitted they had no idea if anyone would believe the documents were genuine and told the illegals to use them only in an absolute emergency.

Altogether, the CIA dispatched eleven illegals in two cycles in 1952 and 1953. The agency's grand plans were soon exposed as fantasy. Some walked straight into traps, making contact with 'comrades' who turned out to be Soviet provocateurs; others landed safely but were swiftly unmasked. By 1954, the CIA believed that just three of the eleven were still operative. Washington had so little information about life in the Soviet Union that anything these three could send back was potentially valuable. But the odds were stacked against the CIA's efforts from the start. The Soviet Union controlled the life and movements of its own citizens with intensive paperwork requirements and rigorous checks. It was simply much harder for CIA illegals to infiltrate a rigid police state without detection than it was for Soviet illegals to enter the freer atmosphere of the West. The project was officially terminated in October 1959.[11]

Details of the CIA's aborted illegals programme remained top secret until a cache of documents was declassified in 2007, but the very public trials of Abel and Molody brought the idea of the Soviet illegal into sharp focus in the Cold War imagination. In 1961, the same year as Molody's trial, a book named *School for Spies* by J. Bernard Hutton promised Western readers an insight into the stunning ambition of the Soviet illegals programme. Hutton wrote in great detail about a secret training facility spread across a huge region in the Soviet interior. Gaczyna contained mock-up districts built as exact copies of those in various capitalist countries: it had an American, a Canadian, a British and even an Indian zone. 'Every division of Gaczyna is a true replica of streets, buildings, cinemas, restaurants and snack bars, public houses and other typical establishments in countries of the English-speaking world,' Hutton wrote.[12] The British section covered sixty square miles of Soviet territory and contained a mock-up city as well as a rural area with several villages. The inhabitants wore British clothes, ate bacon and eggs for breakfast, travelled to their English-speaking jobs on real London buses, and received their salaries in pounds, which they could use to purchase genuine British products in the shops. The Soviets, Hutton made clear, had gone to truly remarkable lengths to train illegals who could then infiltrate the West and wreak havoc.

Everything Hutton wrote about Gaczyna was nonsense. There was nothing even approximating such a facility in the Soviet Union. But the idea of entire artificial cities full of trainee illegals tapped into the uneasiness caused by the Abel and Molody trials. The possibility that the world could end in a nuclear war was overwhelmingly total in its terror. But there was a more insidious kind of fear about the idea that your neighbour or your colleague could secretly be a Soviet spy.

In fact, far from producing a conveyer belt of perfectly trained faux Westerners, the KGB's illegals programme was in crisis by the early 1960s. Abel had remained undetected for years, but his long presence in the United States had brought little by way of intelligence benefits. By contrast, Molody had run a fruitful spy ring, but was caught red-handed picking up classified documents. Long-term illegal deployment no longer seemed compatible with active espionage work. Directorate S found itself faced with a choice: either dispatch sleeper illegals who would do

nothing but lie in wait for future instructions in the case of an emergency situation, or activate illegals for pressing tasks now but risk their capture. Added to these operational pressures was the burgeoning evidence that the solitude and psychological contortions inherent in illegal life were too much for most people to take. Abel and Molody had both found existence abroad painfully lonely, and they were two of the success stories. Many of the illegals posted to the West after the war crumbled under the pressure. They took to drink, had ruinous affairs, and in the cases of Brik and Hayhanen turned themselves in to the enemy.

An even more fundamental issue was the dearth of Soviet citizens with any practical knowledge of the West. In the 1920s and 1930s, the KGB had recruited its illegals from a pool of people who had lived rich lives abroad during the tumultuous revolutionary years. The post-war illegals, like Brik, Abel and Molody, had spent their childhood years in Western countries. By the end of the 1950s, as borders shut and official suspicion of anyone who had spent time abroad grew, there were few potential recruits who could boast of such experiences.

Nevertheless, the KGB gave no serious consideration to abandoning the illegals programme. With an unpredictable Cold War under way that could turn hot at any moment, having operatives who could remain behind enemy lines should diplomatic relations be cut off was more important than ever. The Centre decided the challenges would be surmountable if enough resources were employed. The KGB would increase the number of so-called Line N officers, stationed in Soviet embassies across the world with the task of supporting illegals in the field and finding identities for future operatives. It would also select potential recruits much more carefully and intensify the training period. To mitigate loneliness and prevent dangerous affairs, the Centre decided to train female illegals for the first time. From now on, illegals would be paired up and sent abroad as couples, to provide companionship and to keep a watchful eye on each other.

Year by year, the supporting apparatus to select, train, document and infiltrate the illegals grew bigger and more complicated. Directorate S officers pored over the files of thousands of young people from across the Soviet bloc who had been tapped by regional spotters for potential KGB work. The ideal illegal had to be proficient with languages and be demonstrably patriotic and focused. The candidate should be reasonably

good-looking, but not attractive enough to stand out in a crowd. They should be ideologically reliable, analytically brilliant, and show potential for living a life of deception without being tortured by pangs of conscience. Directorate S whittled down the candidate list until it was left with a few people who met the exacting criteria. Then a relentless period of testing began. Before long, Directorate S was running the most intense training regimen for any espionage programme in history. The re-created Western cityscapes of Gaczyna were an invention, but the reality was just as remarkable.

In 1964, a few months after the exchange in which Konon Molody crossed Berlin and then returned to Moscow, a cheerful young man headed the other way across the divided German city. The passport he would soon pick up at the Austrian embassy in West Berlin identified him as an Austrian citizen by the name of Karl-Bernd Motl. His real name was Yuri Linov, and he was about to embark on his first genuine mission.

Yuri’s long journey to become an illegal and pass for a Westerner began in a small, sleepy town deep in Russia’s black earth region. It had taken nearly a decade for him to make it to this point. The years of his training and deployment were emblematic of the Soviet illegals programme at the midpoint of the Cold War: the patriotism and the pain, the nimble ambition and the mounting frustration, and the increasingly intense training. The result, the KGB hoped, would be worth all the effort: devoted Soviet agents who could walk among Westerners without drawing suspicion and sow havoc in the capitalist world.

PART THREE

An Illegal Life

12

Origin:

The Recruitment and Training of an Illegal

On a cloudy afternoon in the spring of 1955, Yuri Linov walked from the small house he lived in with his parents to the local military committee on the other side of Kalach, a backwater four hundred miles south-west of Moscow. Here, every spring, local boys in their final year of high school were summoned to find out where they would undergo mandatory military service. A thin slip of a boy whose proportions disguised a wiry athleticism, Yuri was a bright student and had won school competitions in English and geography, but he was not expecting to go to university. The post-war decade had been tough on Yuri's family, and he wanted to find a solid job with which he could support his parents. Once he got his military service out of the way, he planned to find work on the railways, following the example of his grandfather.

When he arrived at the military enlistment committee, he was directed to a side room. He knocked on the door, and when he entered, two men dressed in smart civilian clothes, sitting behind a table, looked up at him. They gestured for Yuri to sit and asked about his life plans and goals. Yuri spoke about his love for chess and for the English language. He got the strange impression that the pair already knew much about him and his family. The men did not introduce themselves, nor did they explain where they had come from or which organisation they represented. But it was not hard to guess.

One of the men suggested Yuri might be interested in going to university and studying languages. Perhaps, later, there could be a chance of a career abroad. The promise of foreign adventures sounded especially exotic to Yuri, who had rarely left Kalach, several hours' drive along rutted roads from Voronezh, the nearest city. Of course he was interested, he said, pride swelling at the thought that he had been selected for such a path.

‘The state needs people like you, Yuri,’ said the man approvingly.

Yuri was born in 1938, into a society scarred by the violent upheavals of collectivisation and the purges and soon to be plunged into a nightmarish war. During the fiercest months of fighting, Kalach was only around thirty-five miles from the front line, and it was directly on one of the main Soviet supply lines to Stalingrad. Yuri’s first memories were of endless military columns rumbling past and the roar of planes overhead.

Yuri’s father, Fyodor, one of the editors of the local newspaper, left for the front in the first days of the war. Fyodor’s impeccable proletarian background as the son of a railway worker had got him the newspaper job, despite his minimal schooling, and now his party credentials granted him an assignment as a political commissar in the army. Dispatched to a section of the front near the Dnipro River, he was to ensure there was no seditious anti-Soviet chatter among the rank and file. Yuri was left alone with his mother and grandmother in Kalach. Food was scarce, and everyone worked overtime to support the Red Army’s war effort.

The post-war years were also lean for Yuri as his mother tried to grow enough food for him and his grandmother to survive. His father arrived home wounded, after a period of recuperation in an army hospital. He had lost an eye to shrapnel, and his genitals had been shot off by a German sniper. *Don’t provoke your father,* Yuri’s mother would whisper sternly at the first sign of conflict. *He’s injured.*

There were other demons haunting Fyodor Linov, Yuri realised later, when he recalled the photographs of his father’s 1930s newspaper collective he had discovered stashed away at the bottom of a drawer. Many of the faces had been crudely scratched out. At the time, Yuri had no idea why; later he guessed these men must have been former friends and colleagues of his father’s, liquidated in the purges. Fyodor never spoke about those times, and Yuri never asked. Much later, this dynamic would repeat itself in reverse: Yuri’s parents never queried why he disappeared for years on end, with only a post office box address to write to and no phone number. The less you knew, the better you slept, as the saying went.

The aftermath of the war permeated every part of Yuri’s upbringing. It was common to hear booms reverberating in the fields around Kalach;

Yuri's cousin lost an eye when an old shell exploded as he was playing nearby. His school class often made trips to hospitals and recuperation centres, where the children would sing songs and read poems to the wounded. Almost half of the young men who left for the war never came back, and among those who did, many bore physical or mental scars. A chemistry teacher who had lost a leg in combat was a constant visual reminder of the war's cost. Other teachers beat pupils for little reason, their tempers flickering into life with little warning. Yuri was frequently bored, except in his English class, taught by Liliya Bakhmet, a recent graduate whose angelic appearance and gentle manner set her apart from the weary trauma of the older teachers. Yuri was infatuated with her and worked extra hard on his homework, unlocking a prodigious talent for languages.

When Yuri was in the eighth grade, one morning the students were hustled into the main hall, where the head teacher delivered an emotional speech. Stalin – the great leader, thinker, teacher and father to all – had died, she told the children through tears. The school would write a letter to the Kremlin, she said, expressing the condolences of all the pupils and their determination to defend the great nation at this difficult time. The head teacher's own husband had been arrested back in Stalin's purges during the 1930s and was serving time in the Gulag as an enemy of the people, yet her mourning for Stalin appeared genuine.

This was the state, broken by war and violence but exhorted from above to pull together for a great resurrection, that the two men offered Yuri the chance to serve at the military committee. Yuri's upbringing in the shadow of the war had shaped his youth and would stay with him for the rest of his life. It formed a whole generation of Soviet citizens, exerting a profound effect on society for decades. Preventing another war, now that new capitalist enemies loomed on the horizon, was of the utmost importance.

Soon after the meeting in Kalach, Yuri learned that he would attend the Krupskaya Foreign Languages Institute, in Kharkiv, where he was to study German language and culture. The city had suffered enormous damage in the war, but by the time Yuri arrived in 1955, most of the centre had been rebuilt, with grand buildings lining broad avenues. Two years after Stalin's death, the dictator's image and teachings still loomed

large. His portraits were everywhere, and a huge banner wrapped around one side of the university's athletics stadium quoted his exhortation 'All the world records should be ours.'

Then, in February 1956, Khrushchev made one of the most significant speeches of the entire Soviet era, at an unscheduled, secret session of a party congress in Moscow. He launched a four-hour tirade against the consequences of Stalin's cult of personality and the 'cruel and inhuman tortures' of the era. He chastised Stalin for ignoring intelligence on the eve of the war. Although the speech was not published officially, news of it leaked to Western newspapers and seeped out to the country at large over the subsequent weeks.[1] At Yuri's university in Kharkiv, there would be no more silver-tongued eulogies to Stalin's genius. By the time Yuri entered his fifth and final year of studies, in the autumn of 1959, all his portraits had been removed from the university's corridors. The great quartet of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin, from whom all Soviet students were to take ideological inspiration, had reverted to a trio.

Officers from the Kharkiv KGB headquarters had been watching Yuri closely during his time at university, as one of many candidates being monitored as potential illegals. They sent a memo to the KGB offices back in Kalach, to check there were no suspicions of anti-Soviet activity among his close relatives. They took testimony from his tutors and fellow students about his character and linguistic abilities and made lists of his contacts. Satisfied with the results, they made a move, calling Yuri to a meeting at the beginning of his final year to ask if he would like to help the KGB by informing on his fellow students. A few months later, they made him a formal offer to become an agent inside the university. If he proved himself capable, it was hinted, there could be a real job for him at the end of it and the prospect of foreign travel. Yuri agreed readily, eager to serve. He had been dreaming of a career in the KGB ever since the meeting at the military committee back in Kalach, he said. At the end of the discussion, the men ordered him to write out an oath of cooperation, to be attached to his file: 'I, Yuri Linov, as a patriot of my motherland, with this oath give my voluntary agreement to cooperate with the organs of state security to identify and expose enemy elements. I will not tell anyone about this secret cooperation.' He signed in blue ink, together with the date: 3 January 1960.[2]

At the age of twenty-one, Yuri was now officially a KGB agent. His university studies were supplemented by twice-weekly meetings with his new handlers, which took place in a series of *konskvartiry*, in nondescript apartment blocks around town. To start with, these were mostly interrogation sessions about fellow students. His answers helped the KGB to identify possible anti-Soviet agitators, and also tested Yuri's ability to craft rounded psychological portraits of potential targets. On one occasion his handlers asked him to tell them everything about Vladimir Vorobyov, a fellow German-language student in the year above, who had since graduated and moved to Lviv, in western Ukraine. Yuri had been friendly with Vladimir for several years, and had even visited Vladimir's parents in a nearby city, but now his handlers demanded to know all the negative things he could remember about his old friend. Yuri admitted he had always been irritated by Vladimir's laziness, evidenced by his habit of sleeping in late. More seriously, he recalled that Vladimir had once said that he dreamed of defecting to West Germany. In fact, the KGB knew this already. Another student present when Vladimir made the comments had informed on him, and now the handlers wanted to check whether Yuri would keep quiet or betray his old friend. He had passed the test.[3]

In time, other elements were added to Yuri's training. There were extra German lessons to supplement his university studies, with a specific focus on pronunciation, and English lessons too. On one occasion, two men arrived with two half-litre bottles of vodka. One of the men poured out large measures and, clinking glasses with Yuri, told him to drink it in one gulp. Yuri hated drinking, but he knew better than to argue. The man poured two more glasses immediately. Within an hour, the vodka was gone, and Yuri and his companion were giddily drunk. The third man, who remained stone-cold sober, began a gentle questioning that evolved into an angry interrogation, to see if Yuri's behaviour changed when drunk. He vomited heartily before the evening was out, but managed not to say anything inappropriate.

One of the two men in charge of Yuri's training was Vasily Katrich, a former partisan commander who had worked behind Nazi lines during the war. He explained how to look out for surveillance and tails; every evening, before arriving at the *konskvartira*, Yuri needed to make sure he was not being followed. If he was, he should abandon the meeting and

return home. In Kharkiv, of course, the men who followed Yuri reported to the KGB, but in the hazy future that awaited him abroad, they would be his enemies. Katrich didn't speak any foreign languages, and he had never worked in the West, but his wartime experiences had taught him important lessons about operating underground. He had one piece of advice that Yuri would remember for years to come: 'Don't push your luck.' It was always better to abandon a mission than to have your cover blown; it was better to make tiresome checks to ensure nothing could go wrong than to cut corners.

Yuri continued to inform on his friends and fellow students, telling Katrich whenever he heard anyone say anything subversive. One student let slip to Yuri about a secret club where students read smuggled texts by Freud, Hemingway and other illicit Western authors. Yuri immediately told his handlers, who tasked him with finding out more information.[4] Katrich continually hammered home the mantra that there were to be no secrets from the KGB. To check what Yuri was saying in his private moments, his handlers even placed a bug in his dormitory room. As a note on his file put it, this would help 'to assess fully his personal and professional qualities, ideological preparedness, and devotion to our motherland'.[5]

After five years of study, Yuri graduated with a red diploma, the Soviet mark of university excellence. In the months leading up to his final exams, the committee that decided where graduates would be posted informed him that he would be sent to the town of Horlivka in the Donbas, where he would teach English and German at a local high school. It seemed a little strange to Yuri after all the training he had received, but by now he knew better than to ask questions. He began to prepare for the move. But without Yuri knowing, his Kharkiv handlers had sent a glowing report on him to Kyiv, describing him as a thoughtful, intelligent and modest individual who was politically reliable, willing to inform on his friends, respected the KGB, and was rarely seen drunk. Kharkiv also forwarded recordings of Yuri speaking German for professional analysis, and the subsequent report found that his vocabulary, grammar and intonation were excellent. He had a few phonetic mistakes, but the assessor was positive overall, suggesting that with proper tuition and time spent around real Germans, he could achieve native-level fluency.[6] Taken together, it was enough for the KGB to give

the green light for Yuri's progression to the next stage of training. At one of their final meetings, early in the summer of 1960, Katrich informed Yuri he was not going to Horlivka after all. Instead, he was given an address in Kyiv and told to report there for further instructions.

Yuri was met in Kyiv by a man who introduced himself as the new 'curator' of his training. He explained that Yuri would be given a cover job at Institute Number 102, a scientific research centre in Kyiv where he would, in theory, work as a translator. He would draw a small official salary there, and if he ran into anyone from Kharkiv, or made any curious acquaintances, that was where he would say he worked. Yuri memorised all the details.

The Ukrainian capital, with a population of a little more than a million, was only marginally bigger than Kharkiv, but it felt more like a metropolis. Khreshchatyk, the city's main thoroughfare, was the centrepiece of the city's post-war reconstruction, a sweeping avenue with imposing, Stalinist neoclassical buildings towering over the central expanse from both sides. Elsewhere, leafy boulevards were lined with older buildings, and bright blue trolleybuses trundled through the centre. That autumn, the city's first metro line would open. Yuri was excited to have moved to such a vibrant city.

One Saturday morning soon after arriving, Yuri strolled through the city and bought a ticket for a lunchtime cinema showing. Later, he walked to a prearranged meeting with his curator, near the opera house. The man appeared, as arranged, at twenty minutes to three, near the ticket desks. They made small talk about the upcoming opera schedule; then the man handed Yuri a fat envelope stuffed with roubles and told him to treat himself to a new wardrobe.

The next day, Yuri set off for Podil, Kyiv's old commercial quarter. He spent a few hours trying on suits, hats and gloves in the different shops around the Zhytniy Market. By mid-afternoon he was laden with bags and carried them home on the tram. The next morning, he headed back to Podil. According to tradition, his weekend of extravagant purchases had to be celebrated with a drink, and Yuri spotted a middle-aged man selling Moldovan wine by the tumbler in the market. He knocked back a glass, and it tasted so good he decided to have another. Pleased with how the

day had gone, he realised he still had a little money left over and bought a final few items: socks, handkerchiefs, and a tiepin.

A week later, the trainer appeared at Yuri's apartment, clutching a notepad and pen.

'Do you have a good memory?' he asked.

'I think so,' said Yuri.

'Write me a detailed account of last weekend. Where you went, what you paid, whom you met. All in as much detail as you can.' The man handed over the notepad and departed.

Yuri found that the details of those two days came back to him clearly. He recalled the details of the cinema visit: the first twenty minutes were dedicated to a newsreel about the case of Gary Powers, the American pilot whose plane had been shot down over the Urals earlier that year, and the second part was an omnibus documentary about talented Soviet women. He added other details, such as that he had sat in the second row, in the third seat from the left, next to a skinny blond woman and her son, and that there had been an unpleasant puddle of melting ice cream on the floor by his seat. He then gave a detailed report of his clothes purchases: the shops where he had bought them, how the shop assistants looked, and the numbers of the different trams he had taken during two days of moving around the city. He wrote how he had drunk a tumbler of Moldovan wine to celebrate his purchases, and even recalled that the final items – socks, handkerchiefs and tiepin – had come to 38 roubles and 40 kopecks, slightly more money than he had on his person. He had promised to return to give the shopkeeper the outstanding 15 kopecks. Yuri's report ran to fifteen pages of spidery blue-ink handwriting. He handed it over, pleased with his detailed level of recall.

'Very good,' murmured the man as he read through Yuri's notes the next morning. 'Just one thing, the glass of wine, are you sure it was one glass? Not two?'

The memory of the second glass came back to Yuri. He looked at his trainer, stunned.

'You should get used to the fact we know everything,' said the man, with a hint of a smile.

In fact, a trained team of KGB spotters had been tracking Yuri all weekend and had filed a detailed typed report on his movements and interactions, along with a set of clandestine photographs.[7]

The incident shook Yuri, and for some weeks afterwards he was extra careful to look out for surveillance as he went about his life in Kyiv. Sometimes he saw a face, a gait, a pair of shoes that looked familiar. Was the person peering intently into the shop window behind him the same person he had seen, half an hour previously, glance in his direction? Or had he become paranoid, and these were ordinary Kyivans going about their daily business? It was hard to say.

During his first months in Kyiv, Yuri was informed for the first time that he was to be an illegal. He was given no details on the broader structure of the programme, nor was he told that there were others like him in training, but it was implied that he would eventually be assigned to live in the United States, a dream posting for a patriotic Soviet citizen who wanted to defend his country from Cold War enemies. Over the next two years, Yuri received the tailored training programme that would be given to all budding illegals from the 1960s onward, a never-ending test of his temperament and endurance. Like in Kharkiv, most of the training took place in *konskvartiry.* For the duration of his training, Yuri didn't enter an official KGB building even once. Nor did he see a KGB officer in uniform. He was never told the real names of many of his tutors, and most of them did not know his. During this period, he used a set of Soviet documents in the name of Gennady Dudetsky.

There were long hours of tuition on German language and culture, and several hours set aside each evening for reading German newspapers and novels. There was plenty of political indoctrination in Marxism–Leninism and the tenets of Soviet foreign policy, to make sure Yuri had a solid ideological grounding before being released into the capitalist wilds. Then there was instruction in how to receive and decrypt coded radio messages, as well as other elements of spycraft. Learning to detect surveillance was a key part of the training routine, and one Yuri took to with extra vigour after failing to notice he was being followed as he went shopping. Trainers taught him how to utilise the natural flow of the city to his advantage, using busy metro stations and streets to blend into the crowd and emptier areas to force anyone who was still watching either to hang back and risk losing him or expose themselves by keeping up. Detecting a well-trained surveillance team was not easy. An illegal was never to make it obvious that they were wary of surveillance, so Yuri had

to monitor everyone in the vicinity, but make sure these visual scans remained inconspicuous. Different watchers would rotate in and out of position; in the intervals they might also change their clothes. They would rarely have time to switch their footwear, though, so Yuri was taught to keep an eye on the shoes of those around him.

One day, one of Yuri's trainers arrived in a black limousine with diplomatic plates that resembled the cars used at the West German embassy in Moscow. Yuri and his trainer set off on a road trip through Ukraine, speaking to each other only in German. In each town along the way, the local KGB sprang into action at the unexpected sight of the 'German diplomats'. Yuri and his trainer walked through the towns calmly, shaking off their unsuspecting KGB tails while trying to appear nonchalant and not give away that they knew they were being followed. It was a safe way to observe how real surveillance teams operated against genuine targets. Yuri found it exhilarating.[8]

In March 1961, Yuri's handlers in Kyiv told him to travel to Moscow for a German-language test with the KGB's top specialists. The trainers turned even this mundane task into a convoluted spy caper. Exactly ninety minutes after the arrival of his train, Yuri appeared outside the ticket offices of the Bolshoi Theatre. As instructed, he carried a copy of *Ogonek* magazine in his right coat pocket and kept the lowest button on his jacket undone. He lurked until he spotted a man carrying yellow leather gloves in his left hand, then sidled over to him. 'Do you know what is showing at the Panorama Cinema?' he asked. The man replied, 'Wouldn't you prefer the Stereo Cinema? It's close by and is more impressive.' Code phrases successfully exchanged, the men shook hands, and Yuri was taken to a *konskvartira* for his language exam.[9]

One time, Yuri was given the mission of finding out everything he could about an electronics factory in Kyiv, a secretive place that produced equipment for the Soviet military. First, he called in at the recruitment department saying he wanted a job, but was swiftly told there were no vacancies. So he waited outside the gates looking for women who might work as secretaries in the plant and, when he spotted one, followed her home on the tram. Having located her address, the next day he returned and waited in the building's courtyard. When she appeared, he struck up a conversation with her, pretending he was looking for an

apartment in the area. After some small talk, he invited her to the cinema. They had a pleasant date, and he invited her out again, to the theatre. Each time, they chatted for hours. She opened up to him about her difficult home life and her dreams of getting married, and they started to bond. Yuri managed to slip plenty of apparently casual questions about her work at the factory into their conversation. After the fourth date, he told her he had to go on a trip to another city and would contact her on his return. He wrote up his report, largely based on her information about the inner workings of the factory. She never heard from him again.[10]

Yuri also learned to write personality reports on potential targets. The goal was not recruitment, but to engage in seemingly innocent friendly chatter, sounding out the subject's political views, personal circumstances and quirks. This could then be used in a recruitment pitch by a different agent. Was the person having marital problems? Did they feel overlooked or undervalued at the workplace? Were they vain and susceptible to flattery, or perhaps lonely and looking for love? Yuri spent long hours painting psychological portraits of different kinds of people for the trainers, who taught him how to spot vulnerabilities in a target.

There were also more mundane things to learn. Once a week, an instructor took Yuri out on the streets of Kyiv to teach him how to drive. One morning in April 1961, as Yuri was driving along the embankment in the centre of Kyiv, with the instructor in the passenger seat, he saw a woman rushing out of an apartment building, shouting and waving her arms. Then he noticed other people, also running and yelling. Ahead, people had stopped their cars and were getting out. As they came to a halt, Yuri wound down the window. He heard a woman call out, 'Space is ours!' Others were shouting the same thing. Soviet radio had just announced the spaceflight of Yuri Gagarin, whose 108-minute flight in the Vostok-1 craft marked the first time a human being had made it into orbit. Four years after the launch of Sputnik, the Soviets had won another round of the space race. Yuri felt a rush of emotion tear at his insides.

These years marked a brief but giddy juncture in the Cold War, when it seemed the Soviets might demonstrate their societal model was superior to that of the West. The loosening of Stalin-era restrictions meant that fear and suspicion diminished in everyday life, and after the hard post-war years more consumer goods became available. In cities, hundreds of thousands of families relocated from crowded communal

apartments into hastily assembled blocks that offered boxy but private living quarters. In October 1961, Khrushchev announced that the Soviet Union would be under full Communism by 1980, with free accommodation, health care, and food for all citizens, a thirty-four-hour working week, and the highest standards of living of any country in the world. It was a fantastical claim, but Gagarin's flight seemed to offer incontrovertible evidence that the Soviet Union could achieve anything. For Yuri, the news felt as significant as his memories of Victory Day in 1945.

This pride in his country helped Yuri remain upbeat through the long and arduous training regimen. A document in his KGB file notes that the Centre's plan was for him to take on a German identity and eventually move to the United States.[11] First, though, he would spend a year living in the socialist state of East Germany. The authorities there would not know who Yuri was, but if anything went wrong, he could quietly ask to see a Soviet representative and would be spirited back to the Soviet Union. Failure would most likely result in his being kicked out of the illegals programme, but there would not be an international scandal.

Before he could leave for East Germany, Yuri had to acquire some professional skills. Like most trainee illegals, he had a degree from a prestigious Soviet university, but without Western educational records finding intellectual work abroad would be impossible. Instead, the KGB trained illegals in 'working class' professions. Yuri spent a few weeks learning how to pull apart and put back together a typewriter in a workshop in a suburb of Kyiv, before spending some time in the KGB garage mastering the basics of fixing cars. It was quite a change from the years of instruction in German literature, foreign languages, Marxism–Leninism and espionage tradecraft. He had to get his soft, intellectual hands oily.

Before deployment, Yuri called in at a municipal taxi garage in the city of Vinnytsia with paperwork falsely claiming years of previous experience. For three months, he worked there full-time as a mechanic. None of his co-workers had any inkling that their new colleague was a trainee in the KGB's most elite programme. Every Tuesday at 8 p.m., he tuned in for his coded radio instructions, just as he would have to when abroad. He spent long hours decoding the messages, pushing through the

exhaustion after a day of manual labour. The most irritating missives were those that simply offered best wishes. It could take Yuri hours of work to decode a message, only to find he was being heartily congratulated on the forty-fourth anniversary of the October Revolution. Other times, he received instructions for local contacts he should try to make or for in-person meetings with a trainer. On one occasion, he was introduced to Sergei Stekhov, who had retired as head of the Vinnytsia KGB in 1957. During the war, Stekhov had run a group of partisan operatives who disguised themselves as Germans behind enemy lines. He spent hours regaling Yuri with tales of life in the underground, to boost Yuri's sense of pride in his upcoming work.[12]

Soon after, Yuri received instructions to take a three-day trip to the nearby town of Tulchin, home to a Soviet military base, and collect as much information as possible. Remaining under the radar in the bureaucracy-obsessed Soviet Union was far from easy. Hotels required guests to register officially with their passport, and after decades of spy-mania most people were extremely wary of taking in a paperless stranger. Yuri had to use all his charm and newly acquired evasion skills to avoid the watchful eyes of the local police. He visited the market and struck up conversations with vendors, spinning a long yarn about an imaginary scrape, then offering cash for a bed for the night. Eventually, he found someone willing to take him in. Over the next two days, he spent time finding out as much as possible about the town's economy and the military base on the outskirts. But on his third day, he was picked up by local police and taken for questioning. The officers demanded to know what he was doing in Tulchin and why he was snooping around sensitive facilities. They threatened to charge him with espionage. Yuri could have ended it all by simply telling them he was with the KGB, but he continued to maintain his innocence, even as the interrogation dragged on and got more threatening. Eventually, he was freed. The KGB never revealed to Yuri that this was not a real arrest but a set-up, arranged to check if he would stick to his legend under pressure.[13]

It was one of a plethora of tests that all illegal trainees had to endure, and Yuri was often being tested without realising. When his parents came to visit him in Kyiv for a weekend, the KGB bugged the flat, to check whether he would give anything away to them. More than two hundred pages of handwritten transcripts of Yuri exchanging mundanities with his

parents made it into his training file. Importantly, he never said a word about the KGB, sticking to the story that he was working in Kyiv for a scientific institute.[14]

One afternoon on his return to Kyiv, Yuri was told he would spend the next weeks learning the legend of a new identity that he would use in East Germany. Hans Pracht had been born in March 1936, which would have made him twenty-five, two years older than Yuri. There was also a whole life story that had to be memorised – Pracht's family background, work history and cultural milieu.[15] Yuri also needed to internalise one important piece of advice: never be cleverer than your legend. He had spent years studying German literature at university, but it would be unlikely for a mechanic to be well versed in Goethe. If he began to hold forth on such subjects, he would only draw attention to himself. Yuri had to learn a lot to take on the role of Pracht, but he would have to forget a lot too.

In the spring of 1962, Yuri flew from Kyiv to East Berlin, where he was given the keys to a *konskvartira*. He had a few days to acclimatise before moving on to the city of Halle, where he would be based for the next few months. It was his first trip outside the Soviet Union, and he excitedly took in the sights. Yuri was nervous after spending so long in preparation for this moment and initially avoided any interactions with passers-by. Slowly, he plucked up the courage to speak to people, asking them for directions, making little purchases in the shops, and engaging in small talk. He struck up a conversation with a young woman on a tram, and when he told her he was visiting from Halle, she simply nodded, rather than doing a double take or asking about his accent. His whole body was filled with adrenaline at passing this minor but significant test. He wanted to ask her out for dinner. But he remembered the words of his first trainer, Katrich, back in Kharkiv: 'Don't push your luck.' He bade her auf Wiedersehen and hopped off the tram.

After his acclimatisation in East Berlin, Yuri travelled to Magdeburg and Erfurt, cities that played a role in the legend of his new identity, to build up a bank of convincing information about his supposed past. Eventually, as had been arranged back in Kyiv, he arrived in Halle, a city on the River Saale, not far from Leipzig. He rented a small apartment chosen with the need for good shortwave radio reception in mind and

found himself a job at a garage that repaired buses and other municipal vehicles, housed in the cavernous halls of a former factory. Each day, he rose just after 5 a.m., did his daily workout, and then went to work until late afternoon. The evenings were reserved for German language work, reading the local press, and writing up his reports. Once a week, he met with his new curator, Vladimir Nagayev, by the monument to Halle's most famous historical resident, the composer George Frideric Handel, and they strolled through the streets while discussing how Yuri was finding life in Germany. On these walks, the pair spoke only German. They had to be cautious, but it was still not quite like working in the West, where an in-person meeting with a handler would be reserved for an absolute emergency.[16]

A few months after Yuri arrived in Halle, the United States discovered that the Soviets had placed nuclear missiles in newly Communist Cuba. A stand-off between the superpowers brought the world to the brink of nuclear war. Although the immediate threat subsided quickly, the rhetoric of confrontation endured. The Soviet Union existed in an 'imperialist jungle populated with predators', Khrushchev told a party congress in the Kremlin that October. 'We must educate all our people, our youth, in the spirit of love for the Motherland without reservations, we must have the capacity to defend it, sparing no effort and even life itself.'[17] While the congress was ongoing, the Soviets tested a thermonuclear bomb, the newly designed 'Tsar Bomba', creating the biggest man-made explosion in history. Such geopolitical tensions felt very far away from Yuri, toiling at the garage in Halle. But one day, he assumed, he would be behind enemy lines, playing an important role in the struggle against the Americans.

As the months went on, Yuri became more competent as a mechanic. His colleagues did not grill him with questions about his accent or background; he suspected the Centre's decision to give him a working-class profession helped him maintain his cover and avoid too much prying. There was still the occasional nervous moment, though. It was less than two decades since the Nazis had been defeated, and despite the East German government's allegiance to Moscow ordinary labourers had a complicated relationship with the past. One of Yuri's middle-ranking supervisors would sometimes talk about how his aunt had been raped by

advancing Red Army soldiers at the end of the war, and said he could never be friends with Russian ‘vermin’. Another time, during a winter cold snap, the line manager was walking through the workshop, when Yuri’s boots caught his eye, and he stopped in his tracks.

‘Pracht! What’s that on your boots?’

‘It’s heavy grease, to seal them and keep out the cold,’ he explained.

‘They taught us to do that when I was in a prisoner camp in the Soviet Union during the war, but I never saw anyone do it here,’ he exclaimed, giving Yuri a quizzical look. For the next week, Yuri was on edge, but the incident was quickly forgotten. After all, who would expect that a lowly car mechanic, elbow-deep in grease at an auto garage in provincial East Germany, was a Soviet spy?

Each week, Yuri had to write reports about the current situation in East Germany or personality portraits of people he encountered at work. On one occasion, Nagayev brought a key to a *konskvartira* in Leipzig and gave Yuri the task of getting close to foreign students in the city. At the time, many students from Cuba and African countries were studying in East Germany. Yuri’s task was to see if he could befriend some of them and write personality reports on those who might be amenable to a recruitment pitch by the KGB.

Yuri saw a poster advertising an evening of dances for foreign students and went along to the event, held on a snowy night in December 1962. When he arrived, he found most of the guests drunk, but got chatting to a sober and serious student from Kenya, who spoke passionately of his fury for exploitative colonialism. Raila Odinga was the son of Oginga Odinga, one of the leaders of the political party that a year later would take over rule of newly independent Kenya. Raila told Yuri how he had slipped out of British Kenya to Tanzania and from there had made a circuitous journey via Cairo and Tunisia to East Germany, where he was now studying along with his sister Etha. There was an intensity to Odinga, Yuri wrote in his report. While the other African students laughed and joked, seventeen-year-old Odinga liked to hold forth about Kenya’s independent future and was clearly respected by his newly acquired circle of friends in Leipzig, mainly from Kenya, Cuba and Ghana. For Yuri, the discussions required a change of register as he morphed from a worker in an auto-repair garage to a thoughtful young

student who could discourse on matters of Marxist theory with the children of anticolonial political elites.

He sent Nagayev a report on Odinga and how he might be approached, and his handler told him to keep up his pursuit. Over the next weeks, Yuri met Odinga several times at the dorm where African students lived, and the pair made a joint excursion in the icy winter cold to Leipzig's vast Monument to the Battle of the Nations. When Yuri left East Germany, he suggested to the Centre that when Odinga was a little older, it would be worth approaching him and trying to recruit him as a KGB associate, though the files make no note of whether this approach was ever made. Odinga went on to have a long career in Kenyan politics, including as prime minister between 2008 and 2013.[18]

After some time, Nagayev gave Yuri missions to cross to the other side of the Berlin Wall, which had been constructed in August 1961, two months after a bad-tempered summit between Khrushchev and President Kennedy in Vienna failed to resolve any of the major Cold War disputes. Yuri crossed from East to West and back at the Friedrichstrasse Station. He marvelled at the various kinds of sausage in the shops on the western side of the city, and the high-quality footwear on sale, but the disparity in living standards did nothing to shake his faith. He knew the road to Communism was not going to be easy.

One of Yuri's last assignments in East Germany demonstrated how far his language skills had progressed. He was to meet with Walter Eberhard, a German agent who was cooperating with the KGB, and play the role of a West German intelligence operative, who wanted to recruit Eberhard to the capitalist cause. The KGB let Eberhard believe the approach was real and suggested he play along. It was an elaborate ploy to test both men, which gave the encounter a surreal air as Yuri and Eberhard exchanged pass phrases, probed each other for information, and memorised every detail about their meal at Leipzig's historic Thüringer Hof, to write up in their respective reports. Eberhard was sure he had seen through Yuri's act; he thought his interlocutor looked far too relaxed to be carrying out such dangerous work, and Yuri's tales of life in West Berlin did not ring true. Eberhard's conclusion was that Yuri was a young operative from the East German secret police playing at being a Westerner. He had not

bought Yuri's charade, but it was still a victory of sorts: Yuri had shown he could pass for a native German speaker.

In the spring of 1963, Nagayev informed Yuri that his time in Halle was coming to an end and told him he would travel to Moscow to take further instruction from the top brass of the illegals programme. Yuri packed up his few possessions and left for Berlin, where he returned his Pracht cover documents and picked up new ones for the journey to Moscow. He was now travelling as Comrade Lukyanenko, a Soviet army lawyer returning home from a trip to army bases in East Germany. Soon after his train pulled out of East Berlin, Yuri realised he had forgotten to bring food for his two-day journey, having grown used to the restaurant cars on German trains. Fortunately, he was sharing a compartment with a Siberian pilot returning from a tour of duty. The man was extremely generous with his food and brandy, and as the train trundled through Poland and then entered the Soviet Union, the two men drank toasts to their return home.

As the train neared Moscow, the pilot asked Yuri for a favour. There was a woman living in the capital he wanted to look up, but he had nowhere to stay in the city and couldn't afford a hotel. Perhaps his new friend could put him up for a few days? Yuri's heart sank: it was out of the question. His destination in Moscow was a KGB *konskvartira*, where he was due to write up a full report of his year abroad. To buy time, Yuri assured the pilot that he would be happy to host him, but when the train pulled in to the station, he slipped away. Recalling the story nearly six decades later, Yuri still felt guilty about leaving the pilot in the lurch, despite feeling little remorse about later betrayals that were part of the routine work of an illegal. Back in 1963, he was not yet used to the feeling.

Deceit and subterfuge, his trainers ensured, were the norm in Yuri's everyday life, with one important exception: absolute honesty toward the Centre. Obedience to superiors was sacrosanct throughout the KGB, and particularly important for illegals, who could not be actively monitored by the KGB's counterintelligence service during foreign postings. 'You can never lie to the Centre' is a mantra that Yuri repeated frequently, with cultlike devotion, as he recalled his years of training and service, even though lying to everyone else in his life was a non-negotiable requirement. Partly, the illegals training programme took so long because

it was so hard to transform the language, manners and bearing of a Soviet citizen into those of a Westerner. But it also took a lot of work to mould the paradoxical psychological makeup of the illegal: someone who was simultaneously a slippery, virtuoso maverick and slavishly loyal to the Soviet state.

In Moscow, Yuri was called to a *konskvartira*, where a group of men in civilian clothing were gathered around a table laid with carafes of vodka and plates of sliced meats and cheeses. No introductions were made, but it was clear to Yuri that these men held important positions in the KGB. ‘So, now that the romance of the job has passed, are you ready for a life of this? You can leave now, if you want, and you will have no problems from us,’ said one. Yuri had no reservations at all; he was ready to serve, and a toast was raised to his future. ‘There are two things we need to take care of before you go,’ said the man. ‘First, you must join the party. And second, we’ll need to find you a wife.’[19]

13

Matchmaking:

The Search for a Partner and Co-illegal

Historically, many of the most successful illegals had met women abroad, married them, and then brought their new wives into their work. Dmitry Bystrolyotov, Iskhak Akhmerov and Iosif Grigulevich had all fallen in love with foreign women who were ardent Communists. They confessed their true identities to their wives, who became trusted confidantes and partners in espionage. By the 1960s, the organisation was far too paranoid to allow an illegal to embark on a serious romance abroad, or to reveal their real identity to a woman. They knew that a prolonged affair could lead to disastrous consequences, as had happened in the early 1950s, when Evgeny Brik fell in love and confessed everything to a Canadian sweetheart.

Directorate S drew conclusions from Brik's failure. By the time Yuri Linov was finishing his training, the KGB had begun matching illegals with partners during the training period. The idea was that a carefully vetted woman would also receive training, and the couple would travel abroad together, spending a lifetime posing as a foreign couple. A unit of two illegals would offer support to each other, somewhat easing the loneliness of their existence. And if one lost faith in the Soviet project or planned a defection, the other could drag them back home before it was too late. The KGB, whose upper echelons were entirely made up of men, assumed that the female illegal would always play the supporting role. In the rare cases when women were recruited directly, they were held to a different standard. The KGB file of Galina Linitskaya, one of the few female illegals to work alone, complains that she was liable to be 'too sexually stimulated', not something that was usually considered a problem for men in the field.[1]

The criteria for the wife of an illegal were strict: she should have an aptitude for languages, an unflappable personality, and an impeccable

family background. Yuri's KGB file reveals that the search for this ideal bride started just after he arrived in Kyiv. During his first months of training, his handlers asked for reports on all his university girlfriends or crushes, to see if any might make suitable espionage partners. He had split up with one girlfriend in Kharkiv, Svitlana Kvitka, because he found her too clingy; his trainers suggested he reconnect with her, to check if her devotion to him could be channelled into joint work. Svitlana was delighted to see Yuri again, but told him her dream was to have children and build a stable home. She was clearly not ready for a life of challenges abroad, and the idea was dropped.[2]

A few months later, Yuri remembered Raisa Panchenko, a school friend from back in Kalach who had been good with languages. She had gone on to study English and German at university in Voronezh, Yuri recalled, and he thought she might have what it took to work abroad, though he had no idea if she would be a good match for him; they had been fifteen years old when they had last spent any time together. The KGB sprang into action, tracking Raisa down to a remote village in the Kemerovo region of deepest Siberia, where she was teaching English in the local school. The Kemerovo KGB interviewed her and the school's head teacher, under the pretext that they were representatives of a Soviet ministry looking for English translators. They found she had a reputation as an excellent teacher, but was horribly bored in the isolated village, where she had been formally reprimanded by the school management for dressing 'too stylishly'. A month later, Raisa was on the long journey to Kyiv, for what she thought was an exam to become a government translator. She contacted her old schoolfriend Yuri telling him the news, as the KGB had expected she would. They spent a few days together in Kyiv and got on well. Raisa was as sharp as he had remembered, and her German and English were excellent. But he also found her to be easily depressed and suffering frequent mood swings. She complained about feeling sick after a half-hour drive, suggesting she didn't have the stamina for long-term illegal work. 'She is not suited to be a spy,' Yuri concluded in his written report. Raisa left Kyiv, never finding out the real reason for her visit.[3]

During Yuri's months in Halle, the KGB kept working on the problem. A translator posted to the Soviet embassy in Tunis was briefly considered to have the right qualifications, but was then discarded. In

March 1963, shortly before Yuri was due back in Kyiv from Halle, the KGB put a missive out to several regional Ukrainian head offices demanding they send reports on potential wives for an important young KGB officer. ‘The candidates should naturally meet all the requirements for those who work for us in a political, moral, and work sense, but they should also be no older than twenty-four, not taller than 165 centimetres, be of attractive appearance, and speak German,’ read the document.

The results of this callout were meagre, so the KGB asked for help from Pavel Baikov, who had been one of Yuri’s German tutors before his departure for Halle. Baikov was a former illegal, posted to Germany during the immediate post-war years. While there, he had fallen in love with a local woman and fathered a child with her, without the Centre’s permission. He was recalled in disgrace and dismissed from active duty, though he was given a teaching job at Kyiv’s prestigious Shevchenko University to soften the blow. He was also assigned to tutor new recruits like Yuri in German. He spent the rest of his life wondering what had become of the woman he loved and the child he never got to meet.[4]

Baikov kept his background a secret from Yuri, but it was probably because of his personal tragedy that he took particular interest in finding Yuri a suitable candidate for marriage. He told Yuri there were three young women among his third-year German language and literature students who might fit the bill: they were the highest achievers in the class, and more important, they had already been vetted by the KGB. Baikov brought Yuri to one of the classes, explaining in advance which three women to look out for, and introduced him as an East German friend. There followed an animated hour of good-humoured discussion with the students. Yuri laughed and joked as he answered questions on topics ranging from the classics of German literature to the qualities that made up the German mentality. Almost immediately Yuri’s gaze settled on one of the three candidates, Tamara Kovalenko. He was drawn by her poise and confidence and by her shapely figure. As he stood addressing the class, he had already decided he wanted to marry her. Tamara was listening with mild confusion, wondering why this German seemed to be so disdainful about his own homeland. She had no idea that he had already made a decision that would turn the next decade of her life into an extended ordeal of misery.

Like most university students in 1963, Tamara was a war baby. She had been born in a village in the German-occupied Kharkiv region in February 1942. Her father, Vasily, had been recruited to the NKVD at the tail end of the purges and had left the family home shortly before the outbreak of war. When the Nazis rolled in, they sent thousands of women westward to work as slave labour in German factories, including Anastasia, Tamara's aunt. Tamara's mother was spared the same fate because of her young child, and she tried her hardest to remain nourished enough to feed her baby. In early 1943, the Soviets launched an attack to retake Kharkiv, and there were rumours that in the neighbouring village the Germans had shot the entire population before retreating. Tamara's mother, grandmother and great-grandmother huddled with the baby inside their simple hut. In the piercing cold of the morning of 3 February, Tamara's first birthday, they heard sounds of commotion outside, and the eldest woman crossed herself, whispering fearful prophecies. Tamara let out a wail in her cradle.

When they heard a voice call out, the words came in clear and unaccented Russian: 'Are there any Germans here?'

Tamara's mother cracked open the door. Before her eyes were two handsome Soviet soldiers with flowing white overcoats and white fur hats, mounted on fine white horses. The Red Army had taken the village. Tamara's great-grandmother fell to the ground, kissing the earth and the cradle that held Tamara, and wailed, 'This child! This child is our guardian angel!'

The story of this salvation from certain death was doubtless embellished over the years, but growing up, Tamara was told the tale so many times that she believed it, and she felt it was proof she was destined to do great things in service of the motherland.

Her father, Vasily, returned home in 1945. He was transferred to Korets in western Ukraine and took his family with him. Soviet security forces were mopping up the remains of the Ukrainian partisan movement, and often a call came to the house in the night: a barn had been torched, or an administrative building attacked. Tamara's father grabbed his pistol and disappeared into the darkness. A stern disciplinarian who rarely showed emotion, Vasily did not speak about his work and never once uttered a word of what he had done during the war. Tamara was only allowed to speak to her parents using the formal type of address usually

reserved for strangers, but she was proud of her father and the important work she assumed he was doing in such secrecy.

At school, Tamara's German teacher frequently regaled the pupils with tales of wartime illegals who had gone undercover as Nazis on assassination missions behind enemy lines. The stories inspired Tamara to study German diligently, even though it was the language of the enemy that had torn apart her childhood. She became a studious teenager who dreamed of patriotic feats, partly to help the great Soviet motherland and partly to impress her moody father.

Tamara graduated from high school with a gold medal, awarded to the best students, and in the autumn of 1960 travelled to Kyiv to begin studying German at university. She lived in a dormitory on the outskirts of the city where she shared a room with three other young women and worked ferociously hard. Her only indulgence was to visit the cinema on Lev Tolstoy Square, down the hill from the university, where she often squeezed in a morning film showing before heading to the library for the day. Otherwise, she rarely socialised and rebuffed male attention, worried it would distract from her studies.

On the day that Yuri came to class posing as a German, Tamara did not take a shine to the guest. She too had her issues with Germans – less than two decades after the end of the war, most Soviet citizens did – but it seemed strange to her that he was so derogatory toward his own people. At the end of the hour, she approached him and expressed her distaste. To her horror, he asked her on a date. She blushed and hurried off, flustered.

A few days later, he materialised again in the faculty corridor and begged Tamara to give him a chance to impress her. He suggested dinner, or perhaps even a day trip to the sandy river beaches outside the city? She told him – in her own stiffly polite way, but without any ambiguity – to get lost.

Not long afterwards, a smartly dressed man approached Tamara and politely asked if he might borrow a minute of her time. 'I represent the structure where your father once worked,' he said quietly. He asked Tamara to come to the Lenin monument in the centre of Kyiv that Saturday afternoon, to discuss possible cooperation. At the appointed hour, Tamara approached the imposing granite revolutionary. She could

not believe her eyes. There, with the man from the KGB, was the same irritating German whose advances she had repeatedly rebuffed.

‘Hello, Tamara Vasilievna,’ said the German, who had suddenly acquired the ability to speak native Russian, addressing her by her patronymic to show deference. ‘My name is Yuri Linov.’

Having made an introductory speech, the man from the KGB left Yuri and the startled Tamara alone. Yuri addressed her in formal language and talked of German literature and history. He could sense her melting just a little as she realised he was both intelligent and involved in important work abroad. But it was not clear to Tamara why she had been asked to meet him. She told Yuri she was not the kind of girl who had sex before marriage, to which he answered that he was ready to marry her immediately. She couldn’t understand why he wanted everything to happen so quickly.

‘You don’t understand how much I love studying. I want to study for a further degree. I am a long way from thinking about marriage and children,’ she said.

Yuri reported the bad news back to his handlers. Again, they stepped in to help him, explaining to Tamara that there was an important espionage task for which Yuri needed her help. Some suspicious Germans had arrived in the Soviet Union posing as tourists. They would be taking a multiday cruise on the Dnipro River between Kyiv and Kherson, hundreds of miles downriver. Yuri’s job was to keep an eye on them, charm them, and see if they might reveal their potentially subversive plans. They asked Tamara if she would be willing to accompany him on this important task as his co-agent. Tamara was wary, but she could hardly turn down a request to help protect the Soviet state.

Soon after the boat left Kyiv’s river port, Tamara realised the assignment was a scam. The KGB had provided Yuri with a passport using Tamara’s surname, Kovalenko, and they were meant to play the role of a married couple, sharing the same small cabin. Moreover, it soon became apparent there were only Soviet holidaymakers on board. Yuri appeared in the cabin on the first evening with a bottle of wine and tried to turn on the charm. She rebuffed him furiously. Embarrassed and offended, he spent the rest of the evening playing chess with other passengers. The KGB did send one of its operatives to play the role of the

German ‘target’ after the boat docked in Kherson, but by then the pair were hardly speaking.[5]

Still, years of illegal training had made Yuri both patient and insistent, and Tamara’s resistance only made him woo her more doggedly. He vowed that he would not give up until she agreed to marry him. When Tamara got over the embarrassment of the cruise set-up, she agreed to see Yuri again, and as it became apparent that her suitor was part of an elite espionage programme that helped defend the motherland, her resistance softened. The pair talked for hours about literature and life in Germany. Yuri took her on excursions in his light brown Pobeda car, an unthinkable luxury for most twenty-something Soviet citizens. They began seeing each other regularly, and she eventually agreed to marry him. In return, the KGB gave her a one-bedroom apartment in the centre of Kyiv, just up the hill from Khreshchatyk. It was an upgrade from the scruffy dormitory on the outskirts of town and a notable privilege at a time when many still lived in large, shared apartments, one family to a room. Yuri lived in another one-room apartment a short walk away on Khalturina Street, near the boxing gym where he went several times per week to keep in shape.

Having finally agreed to Yuri’s marriage proposal, Tamara found that she was expected to pass a series of tests. First, there was a medical check-up at the KGB’s clinic in Kyiv. She was nervous as the doctors checked her vision and submitted her to all manner of examinations. They found a heart arrhythmia, but Yuri assured them that Tamara was simply nervous and had slept badly. She received the medical clearance. Then she travelled to Moscow, where she faced questions from Directorate S bosses in a nondescript *konskvartira*. There was little explanation of what was required of her, just several men lobbing questions and sizing up her responses.

After some time, one of the men handed down a verdict. ‘You’re not that lively, but I suppose Yuri is lively enough for both of you,’ he said. It was a grudging green light for the marriage to proceed and for Tamara’s training to commence.

Yuri and Tamara married at the registry office on Volodymyrska Street, not far from the imposing building that housed the KGB’s Kyiv headquarters. This was pleasingly symbolic, although Yuri had never set foot in the actual building. The date, 20 December 1963, was the

anniversary of the founding of the INO, the first Soviet foreign intelligence service, back in 1920. Yuri's curators acted as witnesses; no family members came. Tamara wore an elegant striped blouse that Yuri had bought for her in East Germany, and afterwards they ate chocolates and drank sweet sparkling wine, before walking home in the freezing December weather.

After the wedding, Tamara moved into Yuri's apartment. Almost immediately, she became pregnant. Had the couple conceived after moving abroad, the child would be equipped with a genuine Western birth certificate and the potential to become a useful part of their cover. But Tamara was not ready for deployment, and a Soviet-born child would be an unexplainable hindrance for an illegal's cover story. Tamara was confused that everyone seemed deeply unhappy at the pregnancy. Nobody had explained to her what being the wife of an illegal would entail, just as nobody had explained the work of an illegal to Yuri when he was first recruited. She had imagined that she would be waiting at home while Yuri took trips abroad in various guises. She would continue her studies, and maybe pursue a PhD as she had planned. The reality was turning out to be rather different.

The KGB arranged with her university that Tamara would finish the last two years of her degree in one while beginning training to prepare her for a life abroad. She gave birth to a daughter on September 24, 1964, and named her Natalia. By this time, Yuri had already left the Soviet Union on his first foray into the capitalist world. Tamara was left to raise Natalia alone while continuing her training. In the future, when they went abroad together, Yuri would be expected to do the lion's share of the espionage work, but Tamara's German had to become good enough to pass for native. She also had to learn to decode radio transmissions, the most time-consuming work an illegal had to perform in the field.

Soon after Natalia's first birthday, the KGB told Tamara it was time for her to undergo the same practice year in East Germany that Yuri had completed. The cover identity prepared for her by the KGB was Kristina Ackerman, a Soviet citizen of German origin who had fallen in love with another German studying in the Soviet Union and followed him to East Germany, where the relationship had fallen apart. She would have a year to raise her German to a level that would make it possible for her and Yuri to travel to the West together.

Her handlers told her it was out of the question to bring her young daughter, who had already started to babble a few words in Russian, on her assignment. This seemed odd: Ackerman was meant to be a Soviet citizen, and so might easily have had an infant child who occasionally wailed a Slavic word. But the KGB gave orders, not suggestions, and Tamara left Natalia with her parents. She spent the year in the city of Erfurt, where the KGB set her up to work as an accountant. Tamara admired the orderly nature of East German society, but she had spent most of the two years since her marriage separated from her husband and had now been torn away from her tiny daughter. During the days, she stamped accounting papers, a seemingly pointless job in unfamiliar surroundings. Most nights, she cried herself to sleep.

Yuri felt for his new wife, but he had long ago realised that working for the KGB meant subordinating his desires to the good of the organisation. Tamara would have to do so too. Deep down, he had doubts about her character. She seemed too emotional, too fragile for the work, tearing up over the idea of leaving her infant behind. Had he made the wrong choice? He hoped the rigorous training in Kyiv and the time in Erfurt would toughen her up.

For now, Yuri had more important things to worry about. Just before Tamara gave birth to Natalia, he had received word from the KGB that his new Western cover identity, the one under which he would spend his whole career as an illegal, was ready. It was nearly five years since he had signed the oath to cooperate with the KGB back in Kharkiv. Now, finally, it was time for action.

14

Infiltration:

Entering the West

The days when illegals could switch passports week by week, and waltz across European borders with ease, were long over. Creating a new identity for an illegal took months, if not years, with dozens of Directorate S employees involved. There were two main varieties of false identities. The first option was to use a ‘live double’, when the illegal took over the identity of a living person, often someone who had emigrated from the West to the socialist bloc. The other option was a ‘dead double’, which was more time-consuming to create but more reliable once conjured into existence. Line N officers in Soviet embassies across the globe spent thousands of hours scouring newspapers, record books, and even cemeteries for people who had died as children. These people, if they had no living relatives, could then be ‘resurrected’. The illegal would need to request a duplicate birth certificate and invent a story to explain how they had spent the intervening years.

Yuri’s KGB file suggests his handlers mulled and discarded various possible dead and live identities, until they found a workable option: Karl-Bernd Motl, born in Chemnitz in 1943. The city was now in East Germany and had been renamed Karl-Marx-Stadt, but Motl had an Austrian father, and as such would be entitled to claim Austrian citizenship. Yuri was told that the identity was that of a dead double, but a document buried in a German archive shows that in fact the real Motl was alive and well. The KGB simply stole his identity without telling him and kept an eye on him using KGB officers stationed in East Germany, to make sure he did not travel to the West. Later, Directorate S even sent a pair of Soviet illegals to East Germany, posing as Germans, with the sole objective of keeping a watchful but discreet eye on people like Motl, whose identities had been appropriated by illegals. Yuri never did find out that his double was still alive.[1]

Yuri, born in 1938, was nearly five years older than Motl, but it was decided his youthful looks would allow him to pass for the younger man. The KGB helped Yuri obtain a duplicate of Motl's birth certificate from the East German authorities and drafted letters to Vienna in which 'Motl' asked for permission to emigrate and regain the citizenship of his father. The KGB posted the letters from Karl-Marx-Stadt.

While Yuri waited for the paperwork to arrive, he read Austrian newspapers and pored over a consignment of Austrian school textbooks that had been purchased by the KGB residency. Gradually, he made his way from first grade to the end of high school, imbibing the kind of knowledge a real Austrian ought to have learned at school. In a *konskvartira* in Kyiv, together with his curator, he drew up a chart for Motl with two columns: on the left were details of Motl's life, and on the right the trips Yuri planned to take to visit scenes from his invented past that would lend his stories credence. At the beginning of 1964, the Austrians sent back a positive reply, and a few weeks later Yuri crossed the border between East and West Berlin, equipped with his confirmation letter. At the Austrian consulate, he picked up his newly minted passport with no questions asked. Then he departed for Vienna.

For the KGB, Austria was a promising base: the country's law did not have strict penalties for espionage, several international organisations were based in Vienna, and Austrians tended to be chatty. For KGB officers stationed under diplomatic cover, the city was an excellent place from which to recruit visiting West Germans and Americans.[2] Austria also became the favoured place to 'grow' the legends of German-speaking illegals. On one occasion, a newly arrived illegal working in Graz sent back a note to the Centre that he had come across someone suspicious at his workplace. When different handlers compared notes, they realised what had happened: the illegal had stumbled across a fellow illegal in training, who by coincidence had got a job at the same company.[3]

The KGB's plan was for Yuri to settle in Vienna. Tamara, when ready, would join him. The pair would stage a meeting, date for a while, and marry in Austria under their cover identities. Later, they would move to the United States as husband and wife. The East German years of the Motl biography would never be mentioned, and no one would suspect this charming Austrian couple of having ties to the socialist world.

Yuri was one of roughly a dozen illegals newly minted in 1964: those who had made it through the preparatory marathon without failing due to linguistic, psychological or political inadequacies.[4] By this point, there were about a hundred illegals trained by the KGB, either in Moscow awaiting deployment or already posted in various locations across the globe. In Buenos Aires, an Argentinian German couple ran a small restaurant serving wine and empanadas. In Mexico City, another couple offered jewellery repair services. In Casablanca, a Brazilian man ran a bookshop, and in an East African capital city a Swiss pair operated a beauty salon. An Iranian couple who had lived in India, Lebanon and Ethiopia were now on a grand tour of France and Italy.[5] All of them were KGB illegals. Most of them had been sent abroad with the mission to seek American contacts and explore ways of relocating to the United States, which KGB internal documents now referred to as the *Glavny Protivnik*, the Main Enemy.[6] Yuri understood that this was the KGB's eventual ambition for him as well, but first he would have to cement his cover identity in Europe.

Yuri – in his identity as the newly minted Austrian citizen Karl-Bernd Motl – found an apartment in Floridsdorf in northern Vienna. He got a job at a large automobile repair garage. Each morning, he took the S-Bahn to work and spent hours tinkering underneath the chassis of cars. But he was determined to raise his social status, and he began evening accountancy classes. After a while, he responded to a newspaper advertisement for a company that was hiring freelance insurance agents and was signed up on a commission-only basis. He began pitching life insurance to anyone he encountered, allowing him to ask prying questions without arousing suspicion. In his free time, Yuri enrolled in a local chess club and struck up a friendship with several other players. His most interesting friend was Bert Berkensträter, a German advertising copywriter who lived with his wife in the city. Yuri became a frequent guest at their apartment. Berkensträter was a pacifist and a sexual experimenter, Yuri wrote in a report on his new friend, suggesting it would be easy to recruit him to the Soviet cause. As was standard with the reports illegals sent back, he never knew if the Centre followed up on his advice.

Each week Yuri received a coded radio dispatch from the Centre, often with menial tasks, but sometimes with news from home. In September 1964, it read, CONGRATULATIONS ON BIRTH OF DAUGHTER. MOTHER, CHILD HEALTHY. A few weeks later, he received a message sent to all illegals out in the field: WE, THE KGB OF THE SOVIET UNION, UNANIMOUSLY SUPPORT THE DECISION OF THE POLITBURO TO REMOVE N. S. KHRUSHCHEV AS GENERAL SECRETARY.

The Soviet political elite had tired of Khrushchev, finding him rude, temperamental and megalomaniac, and ousted him from the leadership. Times had changed in the decade since Stalin's death, and Khrushchev was neither shot nor jailed, but instead allowed to live out a quiet retirement. The Politburo settled on Leonid Brezhnev as Khrushchev's replacement. With his gruff voice and macho posing, Brezhnev was a steady hand on the tiller, thought Yuri.

Yuri could only receive radio transmissions. To relay his own messages to the Centre, he used a route the KGB called the 'live letter box'. He composed an innocuous letter from an imaginary person before overlaying it with his real message, written in invisible ink. He then mailed the letter to one of several cover addresses in European capitals, reliable KGB contacts who had been recruited to act as letter boxes. The recipient would hand it over to a Directorate S officer who would send it back to the Centre, where it would be developed using a chemical solution.[7] The process took a month or more.

If the Centre needed to supply Yuri with new equipment or cash, or if Yuri had a message for the Centre that was too urgent for a letter, he could use a dead drop. These are used to this day by many intelligence agencies, to share money or instructions with operatives where a face-to-face meeting is deemed too risky. Line N officers based in Soviet embassies spent long days pacing the streets of their host cities looking for the perfect places for dead drop sites. Illegals in Moscow then spent hours memorising the exact details of particular trees, specific loose bricks, or notable lampposts. In London, one dead drop site was inside a Catholic church in Knightsbridge, behind a copy of Michelangelo's Pietà.[8] Yuri was told to think creatively when selecting his own drop points in Vienna. 'No more public toilets – half the public toilets in Europe are our dead drop sites by this point,' one of his handlers told

him, only half jokingly. It was surprisingly difficult to find a place that could be accessed without any watchers noticing, and where dogs or children would not disturb a package. After many hours of looking, Yuri found the perfect spot: a set of concrete steps in the Prater Park with a nook underneath.

To signal he was ready to make a drop, Yuri left a chalk symbol on a lamppost on a street just outside the park. A Line N officer would later drive past on a regular monitoring run; if he spotted a chalk mark, it meant Yuri would be leaving a drop the next day. An hour before the agreed drop time, having spent several hours making sure he was not being followed, the Line N man would discreetly brush a light blue chalk mark onto a bench in a different part of the park, a signal to Yuri that he was ready to accept the drop. Yuri, after several hours of walking through the city to throw off any potential surveillance, left his letter, crumpled up and stuffed into an old cigarette packet, at the dead drop site. He then returned to the lamppost where he had left the original signal and wiped it off, to indicate he had made the drop. Soon after, the Line N officer took a stroll through the park. Even if he was under surveillance, his watchers would only see him stop by some steps and bend down to tie his shoelace. They would not notice that with a barely perceptible move of the hand he had grabbed the cigarette packet from under the steps and shoved it in his pocket, before continuing on his way. On his way out of the park, he would stop innocuously for a short rest on a bench, and as he stood up, would wipe off the chalk mark. When Yuri did his final checks, if the chalk mark was still present, it meant there had been a problem. In that case, he would retrieve the package and start the whole process again on an agreed-upon reserve day. This was the life of an illegal – time-consuming *en passant* interactions, carefully choreographed thousands of miles away in Moscow, to make sure there was no face-to-face contact between an illegal and a support officer.[9]

After a year in Vienna, Karl-Bernd Motl was called up for compulsory service in the Austrian military. Yuri reported back to the Centre and asked for instructions. He thought it would be a good idea to perform the nine-month service and further cement his cover, but the Centre summoned him back to Moscow. The new policy was to keep illegals in the ‘home country’ of their legend as briefly as possible. Nine months of

military service would bring too much scrutiny, and it wasn't necessary now that Yuri had a genuine passport in hand. He told his friends in Vienna that he was going to skip military service on grounds of pacifism, and then he returned to Moscow. There, he was given a new destination: Dublin. He was to scout for interesting contacts, particularly Americans, and wait for Tamara to complete her training.

For the third time, after Halle and Vienna, Yuri had to start from scratch in new surroundings. He rented himself a room in a large boarding house on Howth Road, near the suburb of Killester, and set about looking for work. He put himself on the consular list at the Austrian embassy and registered in the police aliens department. 'Bernie Motl', as he came to be known, spent a couple of weeks as a trainee butcher, but he could not get on with the work. Instead, he turned his mind to entrepreneurial schemes. Yuri recalled the story of John Glenn, the astronaut who had left NASA in 1964 and ventured into politics. Glenn had to withdraw from an Ohio Senate race when he slipped in the bathroom and suffered head injuries. It gave Yuri an idea. He found a supplier of bath mats and imported a batch of one hundred. He drove door-to-door, hawking his wares in the suburbs of Dublin, and subsequently throughout the country. He perfected a salesman's pitch about Glenn's tragic fate while striking up conversations about life, love and politics with the people he met. Before long, he had sold the first hundred mats and ordered a new consignment.

Yuri soon had another idea, having noticed the boom in television ownership under way in Ireland.[10] He read a magazine article about a new magnifying screen developed in Japan, which could be placed in front of a small television set to increase the size of the image. He found an export agent, and when the stock arrived, he again set out across the country to talk people into buying the device. The Soviet secret agent was turning out to be quite an inventive businessman.

The bath mats and the Japanese screens were ingenious ruses that allowed Yuri to initiate conversations with people across the island, but it was not clear to what end. Usually, spies have to find ways to coax important information from reluctant targets, but in Ireland, Yuri had the opposite problem. Most people he met were happy to regale him with their life story, sometimes for hours on end. But none of the information seemed likely to be of much use to the KGB. On one occasion, Yuri was

ordered to make a trip to Enniskillen in the North and send back a report on the simmering tensions between the Catholic and the Protestant communities that later in the decade would lead to the start of the Troubles. Yuri and two Irish friends set out on a jaunt. In Enniskillen they drank in edgy Republican pubs, where resentment against the British army and the local Protestant Unionist population was high. Yuri wrote a report to the Centre, informing them that he could cultivate contacts in the North for use in operations against Britain. He received a firm message back by radio transmission instructing him not to travel north again. On another occasion, he wrote to the Centre about some hard-line Irish nationalists he had met at the boxing gym where he spent several evenings a week. Again, the Centre told him to avoid further contact. His eventual mission to the United States was too important to ruin by getting onto the police radar for subversive activity.

Yuri sought out various ways to pass the time. He took advantage of free French classes offered by the French embassy, and even tried to learn Gaelic. He spent evenings boxing or playing chess at the premises of the Dublin Chess Club. He sometimes invited young students he got chatting with for games. One of them, contacted during the research for this book decades later, still remembered Bernie Motl as a ‘personable fellow and an exciting chess player’ who later disappeared.[11] After a game, he often went to the pub for a drink and to chat up women. He had to report his affairs to the Centre and was under strict orders not to get attached to any local women. But in Catholic Ireland, Yuri found the women to be impracticably clingy. He had secret letters to write and a radio transmission schedule to keep; he could not have people hanging around the house.

Sometimes, he became downcast when he thought about Tamara and the daughter he had not yet met. He wondered how his existence in Ireland could possibly be worth the separation. But he comforted himself with the thought that he was, in effect, ambassador of the great Soviet nation to Ireland. At this point, Ireland still had no diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union, so the Austrian bath mat salesman Bernie Motl really was Moscow’s top representative on Irish territory, even if nobody in Ireland knew it.

One evening in the summer of 1966, Yuri received orders to prepare for a meeting in London. He took a boat to Liverpool, marvelling at the lack of security checks given the increasingly tense situation in Northern Ireland at the time, and from Liverpool he went on to London by train. He found the British currency impossibly confusing and made repeated mistakes when trying to work out how many shillings in a pound and pence in a shilling. It was not a problem: Bernie Motl had just as much right as Yuri Linov to be confused by quaint English units.

Yuri arrived in England as the football World Cup was drawing to a close. The Soviet team had beaten Italy, Chile, North Korea and Hungary on its way to the semi-final. Yuri's meeting was not far from Wembley Stadium, the tournament's showpiece venue, a few days before the big game. At the appointed hour, he was greeted in Russian by an unfamiliar man in a suit. The operative had flown in from Moscow, presumably under the cover of an official on the Soviet football delegation. He passed on a bag of cash and some warm words and told Yuri that his wife would be ready to join him soon. They spoke for about half an hour, and then the man bade Yuri farewell.

A few days later, Yuri bought a ticket for the third-place play-off at Wembley, in which the Soviet team played Portugal. The game was closely fought, and Yuri was careful not to show any undue emotion when the Soviets scored. Eventually, they lost the game 2–1, with the famous Eusébio scoring twice. Two nights later, the England team won the tournament, beating the West Germans 4–2 in front of nearly ninety-seven thousand spectators. Millions of Londoners came out onto the streets to celebrate. In Trafalgar Square, people danced in the fountains. A banquet was held in honour of the victory, to which the West German, Portuguese and Soviet delegations were invited, including perhaps the undercover man who had met with Yuri.[12]

A year later, Yuri packed up his life in Dublin and journeyed to Brussels. The headquarters of NATO had recently moved from the outskirts of Paris to the Belgian capital, and the Centre wanted illegals there to identify potential targets. Yuri was ordered to spend some weeks scoping the city out, before reuniting with Tamara in Vienna. He arrived in Brussels with a few suitcases filled with possessions from Ireland. One day, after a week in the city, the internal alarm he had honed during his

years of training sounded. He couldn't be certain, but he suspected he was being followed. A man he had spotted a few minutes earlier was keeping pace behind him, and when Yuri turned to look, the follower seemed to flash him a smile. Yuri's pulse quickened, but he remembered his training and carried on strolling as if nothing were wrong, weaving through the crowds on the pavement and using the glass of storefronts as a natural way to check behind him discreetly. Sure enough, a few minutes later he caught sight of the same man's outline. Yuri entered a café, sat down, and ordered a coffee to help collect his thoughts. To his horror, the man entered the café and sat down at a table not far from him. The brazenness was bad news. A tail that did not mind being spotted meant only one thing: arrest was imminent. Had a defector given him away?

Standing up gingerly, without glancing at the neighbouring table, Yuri walked across the café and entered the men's bathroom, thoughts racing through his head about upcoming interrogations. The tail followed him. Standing by the sinks, Yuri turned around and came face to face with the man, ready to be wrestled to the floor and slapped with a pair of handcuffs. Instead, the man flashed him a smile and gestured with his eyes toward one of the cubicles.

'*Toi aussi, oui*?' he asked.

Yuri froze for a moment, confused. Then it dawned on him. This was not an arrest; it was a proposition. Relieved but also flustered, he blurted out, '*Non, non,*' and dealt the man a punch to the kidney. He pushed past him and ran out of the bathroom and onto the street. The incident rattled Yuri. His furtive glances had obviously been mistaken for conspiratorial acknowledgement.

Yuri's sense of unease only intensified when the West German divorcée Kristina Stolz – as his wife, Tamara, was now to be known – arrived in Vienna. This was Tamara's first foray into the capitalist world. The story was that she was a divorced West German nurse taking a holiday to visit her lover, Karl-Bernd Motl. Yuri and Tamara's reunion, albeit masked by their two new identities, should have been a joyous moment after the arduous years of separation. But it was clear that Tamara was struggling with the psychological burden of the life that had been thrust upon her. Yuri had planned to introduce Tamara to some of his Vienna friends, but he was not sure that her cover story would hold. He found her to be more nervous and naïve than he had remembered.

Tamara had a real talent for receiving radio messages and could transcribe and decode the groups of five digits much faster than Yuri. But she could not sleep at night and would often wake up crying. She missed her daughter, and she told Yuri she had bad premonitions about the future. The pair spoke only in German, as warranted by the rules of *konspiratsiya*, but their discussions were so emotionally charged that had anyone been listening, they would have quickly realised that this was no ordinary couple.

As part of Tamara's acclimatisation to life in the West, she and Yuri embarked on a ten-day trip to Italy and Switzerland. The legend was that the Austro-German couple were taking a holiday together, but as usual their task was to assess whether new acquaintances might hold use for the KGB. Americans were always worth pursuing, but with other nationalities a quick decision had to be made: were they useful, or were they what Yuri's trainers called 'ballast'? Did they have a job at a sensitive institution, or a family member who did? Did they have contacts in the United States? Did they have radical leftist views or other strongly held opinions that could be exploited by a recruiter? If the answer to all these questions was no, Yuri and Tamara were to move on to the next target.

Yuri, garrulous and naturally charming, easily struck up conversations. On one occasion, he and Tamara met a friendly Canadian couple in Switzerland, and Yuri began talking about how much he missed his family, a standard ruse to get people to start talking about their own families. Inadvertently, Tamara kept changing the subject. Eventually, Yuri took her to one side and in an exasperated voice explained the situation: 'This guy is just about to start talking about his family and suddenly you're talking about how much you love German fairy tales!'

It was increasingly clear to Yuri that Tamara was not suited to the work he had brought her into. She was polite, kind and naïve, all the wrong qualities for the job. She had also developed a streak of paranoia. Sometimes, she begged him not to go out, convinced he would be caught. When he told her about the incident with the gay man in Brussels, she was sure it was a set-up. After six weeks together, Yuri prepared a letter to the Centre, informing the handlers that Tamara was unfit to work abroad.

Some weeks later, Tamara received an order to leave, alone, for the circuitous journey back home to the Soviet Union. She took a train to West Berlin and then crossed back to the east side to report to the KGB facility at Karlshorst outside the city, drained of physical and psychological energy. She was given a medical check-up, and when the results of her cardiogram came back, the doctors glanced at one another nervously. One of them made a call. ‘We need to send this woman back to the Soviet Union immediately. Let’s hope she makes it,’ he said into the phone.

In Moscow, after a thorough debrief, Tamara was booted from the illegals programme. Many illegals – both men and women – suffered the same fate over the years, unable to bear the strain of the double life and the family separation that the KGB demanded of them. Some never got as far as deployment; others were withdrawn quickly. A few suffered paranoid attacks or mental illness while stationed abroad and had to be summoned home or, in extreme cases, kidnapped and dragged back by force. For Tamara, there was relief that the ordeal was over, but also uncertainty. What would become of her life now?

The radio message that came for Yuri bore different instructions: USING THE DUPLICATE OF YOUR MAIN PASSPORT YOU ARE TO TRAVEL TO HELSINKI. FROM THERE, TO PRAGUE.

Yuri knew what was happening in Prague, for it had been plastered on the front pages of newspapers for months. The Soviets had invaded the territory of their supposed ally to crush a series of reforms known as the Prague Spring. What Yuri did not yet know was that there was another component of Moscow’s response. He was headed to join the biggest operation in the history of Directorate S. It was a mission that would redefine the role of the KGB’s illegals for the remainder of the Soviet period, and it remained so secret that to this day Moscow’s spymasters have never acknowledged it took place.

15

Operation Progress:

Undermining the Prague Spring

In the spring of 1967, Leonid Brezhnev appointed Yuri Andropov chairman of the KGB. A stern figure with swept-back silver hair and thick steel-rimmed glasses, Andropov would go on to become the KGB's longest-serving chairman. During the economic stagnation of the 1970s, he would transform the KGB into an enforcer of ideological orthodoxy, and when Brezhnev finally died in 1982, Andropov would succeed him as general secretary. Later, Andropov would serve as a role model for another security services chief, Vladimir Putin.

Andropov's inner world was an enigma. He rarely spoke in public and did not pause for idle chitchat in the corridors of Lubyanka. Even the few close associates who spent time with him struggled to know what he was thinking. Still, most KGB officers respected him. He had little time for flattery and was contemptuous of toadying, which was unusual for a Soviet official by this point.[1]

Andropov's worldview was animated by a visceral fear of liberalisation and free speech, a position he developed a decade earlier as Soviet ambassador to Hungary. In 1956, a quarter of a million people, many of them students, marched through Budapest demanding political change. Thousands of workers came out in support of the demonstrators, taking the leadership by surprise. From the Soviet embassy, Andropov called on Khrushchev to send in troops to quell the unrest. Crowds of protesters seized weapons and even commandeered a few tanks. Soviet troops stationed in the country briefly retreated, but several days later Khrushchev ordered a large invasion force to re-enter Hungary and brutally crush the revolution. Tanks fired into the city from the Buda hills across the Danube. Up to three thousand Hungarians were killed, and thousands more were arrested in the aftermath.[2]

Andropov never forgot the sight of the corpses of grey-uniformed Hungarian security agents hanging from lampposts and trees or tossed into piles of autumn leaves.[3] The sudden transformation of loyal Communist workers into a seething, armed resistance force was evidence of how quickly the certainties of Soviet control could dissolve. The experience engendered in Andropov a lifelong obsession with rooting out dissent, both inside the Soviet Union and in the broader socialist bloc. He saw plots backed by the capitalist West everywhere. Just weeks after he took over as chairman of the KGB, he wrote to the Politburo explaining that 'the reactionary forces of the imperialist camp, led by the ruling classes of the USA', were actively trying to undermine the Soviet Union with 'psychological warfare'. He opened a new arm of the KGB to combat 'ideological diversion' among Soviet citizens. The resulting Fifth Directorate became the main tool of repression against dissidents over the next two decades.[4] The mass executions of the 1930s were never repeated, but the Fifth Directorate kept a close watch on any murmurings of discontent. Those who were considered ideologically unreliable had trouble finding work. In some cases, they were arrested or forcibly incarcerated in psychiatric institutions.

A year after Andropov took over the KGB, events in Prague seemed to be following the same script as those in Budapest twelve years previously. The Czechoslovak party leader Alexander Dubček spoke of introducing 'socialism with a human face', while the party congress in Prague in April 1968 announced a plan to 'build socialism in this country in a way corresponding to our conditions and traditions', which included new guarantees for the freedom of speech, press, assembly and religion. Already, the influence of the West had become more visible in Czechoslovakia during a gradual liberalisation of cultural and intellectual life. Authorities turned a blind eye to the flourishing black market for blue jeans; plays and films that would never have passed the Soviet censor were put on to full houses in Prague; and permits were granted for a number of Hollywood studios to film in the country. Newspapers published dissenting opinions and gave voice to debate, while young people eagerly followed Western radio stations, music and fashion. 'Over the past few years, the young generation here has gone beat. Blue jeans and long hair are everywhere,' wrote one American foreign

correspondent in 1967. Students from Western Europe travelled to the city, where they sang songs, strummed guitars and smoked joints with their new friends in the Eastern bloc.[5]

In Moscow, the Politburo watched the unfolding events with increasing concern. In May, Brezhnev summoned Dubček to Moscow and harangued him over the Western influence in Czechoslovakia, telling him that even a fool ought to understand that it came with political strings attached. He hinted that the Soviets could intervene to 'defend socialism' if required. Dubček made gentle threats of his own in return, noting that numerous West German firms were interested in investing in Czechoslovakia. Prague had rebuffed the overtures, he said. For now.[6]

Andropov took a dim view of the Czechoslovak reforms. In March 1968, he demanded that 'concrete measures' be taken to prepare for armed intervention, fearing the Soviet leadership could be caught out, as in Hungary twelve years previously.[7] The new Czechoslovak interior minister, Josef Pavel, had promised to strip the country's security service, the StB, of some of its powers.[8] The KGB delegation in Prague began working secretly with individual hard-liners in the StB, but Andropov realised that looking at events in the country only through this lens would provide a dangerously incomplete view of the mood. The Czechoslovak government had loosened the country's visa policy, making it easy for Western tourists and businesspeople to visit. It was another reform that irritated the Soviet leadership, but Andropov realised it also provided an opportunity. It would now be much simpler for illegals with Western identities to arrive in the country undetected. They would then be perfectly placed to infiltrate the reform movement.

Andropov signed an order to launch a mission dubbed Operation Progress. Fifteen illegals would be urgently dispatched to Czechoslovakia. During the next few weeks, eleven Western European men, a Swiss woman named Maria Weber, a Lebanese carpet dealer called Oganes Sarajian, and a Mexican named Felipe Burns arrived in Prague. Most came on flights from Helsinki or East Berlin; some came by car from West Germany.[9] Who better to befriend the leading lights of the Prague Spring than a group of foreign liberals sympathetic to their cause?

Directorate S had previously used illegals for short-term assassination or subterfuge missions, but never on this scale.[10] According to a hastily drawn-up plan of action, the illegals were given expenses of $300 per month, as well as funds to rent apartments in Prague. Five of the new arrivals were told to visit restaurants, museums, galleries and hotels and find opposition-minded Czechs. If necessary, they could pay for useful political information, gently hinting that the money might be coming from Western intelligence.[11] They were to identify the main agitators of the movement, their plans, and who among them might be open to recruitment, using either money or blackmail. Other illegals were given specific targets including liberal writers, television anchors, and student leaders. Some were tasked with befriending Czech newspaper editors and goading them into printing anti-Soviet statements, to further escalate tensions. In some cases, illegals were ordered to work in pairs, meaning their handlers took the unusual step of introducing them to each other.[12]

On 19 July, *Pravda* reported that a buried cache of American-made weapons had been discovered near Karlovy Vary, a spa town close to the West German border. The Soviets presented it as proof that the West was sowing dissent in Czechoslovakia. In fact, the arms cache had been planted, in boxes conveniently marked ‘Made in USA’, by Andropov’s illegals.[13] This invented scandal, and other similar ‘active measures’, served several functions. First, Moscow wanted to ‘prove’ to the Czechoslovak party elite that the forces it was unleashing were dangerous and could lead to the collapse of Communism. The reaction inside the Soviet Union was equally important to Andropov. The Soviet press was mostly silent about the Prague Spring, but the events could not be completely ignored, and it was important to explain to Soviet citizens that the situation had come about as a result of nefarious American policies.

After all, the desire to see ‘socialism with a human face’ had the potential to inspire many people who wanted change, even those who were loyal to the party. The Soviet writers Boris Polevoi and Konstantin Simonov travelled to Prague as part of a cultural exchange in May 1968. The pair struck up conversation with a West German journalist at their hotel bar, and after several drinks both writers praised the changes under way in Prague. Unfortunately for the writers, their drinking partner was

neither a German nor a journalist but one of Andropov's illegals. He sent a report of the conversation back to Moscow, where it was taken as further evidence of the potential for the Prague Spring's subversive influence to spread if left unchecked.[14]

The scale of discontent in the country was becoming clear. Andropov believed it was imperative for Brezhnev to act immediately, to bring the Czechoslovak party back into line and prevent other satellite states from getting ideas. At a heated Politburo meeting in July, he called for troops to be sent in. Others spoke in favour of holding a summit with Dubček to try to find a diplomatic way out of the crisis, and Andropov was voted down.[15] That summit, held on the border between Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union, ended without agreement, and on 21 August, Brezhnev ordered an invasion. Hundreds of thousands of troops crossed the border over the next days, in the biggest military manoeuvre in Europe since 1945. In Prague, a group of StB officers entered the Central Committee building accompanied by KGB minders and arrested Dubček. He surrendered to them meekly, stunned that the Soviets had followed through on their threats. Demonstrators thronged the streets holding up signs telling the Soviets to go home; graffiti appeared across the city likening the Soviet star to the Nazi swastika. Many young Soviet soldiers, fed propaganda that they were on a heroic mission to save Czechoslovakia from American imperialists, were shaken and disturbed when they found the population shouting abuse at them.

Most Czechs and Slovaks realised attempts at armed resistance would lead to carnage, and there was no mass bloodshed when the Soviet army entered the city. But the passions stoked by the months of reform could not be crushed by tanks alone. Faced with this level of anger, Brezhnev had to make a show of negotiating with Dubček. The Czechoslovak leader was flown to Moscow and delivered to the Kremlin close to midnight, without even being given the chance to wash.[16] Brezhnev lectured Dubček and other party officials about the discovery of underground arms caches (it is unclear if Andropov ever told Brezhnev that they had been planted by the KGB's own illegals), and a dejected Dubček returned to Prague and called for compromise. Over the next months, an uneasy coexistence emerged: Soviet troops remained on the streets, but student activists and a lively free press continued to push for

reform. The StB was split down the middle. In one department, officers pulled Soviet flags and slogans from the walls. Some left work, announcing they would now go undercover, to serve the revolution. Others in the StB followed Moscow's line, later reporting on which of their colleagues had proved politically unreliable. In January 1969, five months after the start of the invasion, a student named Jan Palach set himself on fire in Prague's Wenceslas Square, a gesture of desperation that captured the imagination of the nation. After a few days in hospital in agonising pain from the burns, he died, and his funeral evolved into a massive protest march.

By the spring of 1969, there were no longer tanks in the streets of Prague, but Soviet troops were stationed in thirty-six bases across Czechoslovakia, and the threat of clashes remained.[17] On 28 March 1969, the Czechoslovak ice hockey team played the Soviet Union in Stockholm. The team refused to shake hands with the Soviets before the game, and some of the players taped over the Soviet star on their jerseys. They were cheered on by the mostly Swedish crowd chanting, 'Dubček! Dubček!' At the end of an emotionally charged and extremely tense match, the Czechoslovakia team won 4–3.[18] Back at home, joy and anger swirled, and hundreds of thousands of people flooded the streets of every major city, cheering in celebration. In central Prague, a group attacked the offices of the Soviet airline, Aeroflot, in Wenceslas Square, breaking windows, smashing up the equipment inside, and making a bonfire out of Soviet travel posters and portraits of Lenin.[19] It was the final straw for Moscow, and in the subsequent days Dubček was replaced with Gustáv Husák, a loyal hard-liner.

This was the uneasy atmosphere reigning in Prague when Yuri Linov received his summons. He flew from Vienna to Helsinki, where he picked up a duplicate version of his Karl-Bernd Motl passport. It was a sufficiently good forgery to make it past Czechoslovak border control and ensured his main passport was not marred by any stamps from Eastern bloc countries. When Yuri arrived in central Prague, he passed a newsstand selling the city paper *Večerní Praha*, which featured a front-page photograph of the burned-out Aeroflot office. Despite the crackdown, there were many who still hoped to bring the spirit of the previous year back to life. It did not take Yuri long to make contacts

inside these circles. The landlord of the apartment he rented had a son who was active in the student underground, and when the friendly Austrian insurance salesman explained he had been inspired by the Prague Spring, the landlord made the connection and Yuri soon found himself in a bar with other earnest young students. He met one group who were helping to print anti-Soviet flyers, and another of producers and camera operators who worked for state television. Yuri hinted he might be able to help them to get footage that was too sensitive for the official media out to his contacts in Austria.

A few of his new friends spoke German, but many of the young people he met knew only Czech and a bit of French. Yuri could understand quite a lot of Czech, but he had to pretend not to understand a word, because Karl-Bernd Motl was not meant to know any Slavic languages. Broken French, aided by lots of wine, was the lingua franca with his new friends. Language was not the only communication issue. Yuri was a clever man with a good education, but he had spent the past nine years elbow-deep in grease in automobile garages in Halle and Vienna and then hawking bath mats in small Irish towns. Suddenly he had to hold his own with young intellectuals who wanted to discuss poetry, philosophy and the future of Communism. It was a jarring transition. The young Czechs were happy to have a foreign friend who supported their goals; they perhaps imagined he had links to influential people or even intelligence services in Western Europe. They mostly wanted to reform Communism, not crush it, but they needed all the help they could get in the face of the Soviet crackdown. And Karl-Bernd Motl was always happy to buy the drinks, which quickly made him popular. After long nights propping up the bar, Yuri went back to his apartment to sleep off his hangover and then write reports on his new contacts, including detailed information on their political views and any personal weaknesses that could be used as a hook for a potential future recruitment or blackmail.

Yuri left the reports in dead drops around the city. Occasionally, he met with Dmitry Vetrov, a handler the Centre had dispatched to Prague to coordinate the work of the illegals. A lumbering giant of a man in his early fifties, Vetrov asked Yuri to call him Dimka, an unusually familiar address for a KGB handler. Jovial and ruthless, Dimka reminded Yuri of a cartoon bear, and his heavy-footed presence in Prague was at odds with

the extreme operational caution the Centre usually exercised when handling illegals in capitalist countries. Dimka spoke to Yuri in Russian, a surprising lapse of *konspiratsiya.* On one occasion, he got into Yuri's rental car and lit up a cigarette. When Yuri protested that the coarse smoke of Dimka's Soviet cigarettes might be recognised by the friends he planned to meet later, Dimka laughed and shrugged his shoulders.

Because Dimka was more easy-going than many of his previous superiors, Yuri once ventured so far as to question the logic of the Soviet operation in Prague. Clearly these young reformers were not imperialist reactionaries, merely idealists who wanted to improve socialism, he protested. Wasn't there a better way to deal with them?

'Your problem is that you think too much,' Dimka grunted in disgust. 'Enemies are enemies.' He told Yuri about an operation he had taken part in to neutralise a dissident in East Berlin. 'I showed up disguised as a removals man and whacked him on the head. Then we rolled the fucker up in a carpet and sent him back to the Soviet Union.' If Dimka were in charge, the targets in Prague would be dealt with in the same way. 'Carpet. Plane. Siberia,' he repeated, to emphasise the point.[20]

One of Yuri's main targets in Prague was the journalist Jiří Hochman, who had spent a decade as a foreign correspondent for the party paper *Rudé právo,* including a stint as Washington correspondent. On his return to Prague, he penned several anti-Soviet editorials and began editing a liberal weekly called *Reportér.* The KGB was particularly interested in Hochman because of his contacts in American media and policy circles, including the long-standing *New York Times* correspondent Tad Szulc, for whom he remained a source.[21]

Over the years, Hochman had interviewed luminaries in both the Communist and the capitalist worlds, including Fidel Castro, Chairman Mao and Jean-Paul Sartre. A man of his experience was not likely to have much time for a visiting Austrian insurance salesman. But through some of his new contacts, Yuri met Majda, the sister of Hochman's wife, Zuzana, who worked for state television. He befriended her and her boyfriend, Milan, who was also a television producer, and she invited Yuri to the Hochmans' country house outside Prague. Majda and her friends spent long sessions drinking and playing cards in an adjacent barn. Yuri was more interested in the goings-on in the main house, where Hochman and his wife received a steady stream of intellectual and

political visitors.[22] He managed to accost Hochman a couple of times, but he failed to strike up much of a conversation. Still, he learned a lot about the journalist.

Keeping close to his new friends meant a lot of nights out in bars, smoking cigarettes and drinking cheap wine. On one drunken evening, Karel Kryl, a young singer who achieved cult status as the bard of the Prague Spring, painted a picture for Yuri as they drank together; another time, there was a rumour that mass arrests would soon be under way, and Yuri went with the group to lie low in a house in the mountains. On one occasion while with Majda, Yuri noticed two men shadowing them. He and Majda exchanged silent glances and quickly went their separate ways. The StB operatives following Yuri must have suspected he was a spy, but would never have guessed he was spying for the KGB. Another time, a man sidled up to Yuri after hearing him speak German and quietly introduced himself as an unhappy StB employee. He discreetly asked if his new Austrian friend might be able to help him defect to the West. Yuri said he did not have any contacts of that kind and immediately reported the approach to Dimka. ‘We checked him out, and he’s definitely a traitor,’ Dimka told Yuri later. He did not specify what happened to the man.

Among Yuri’s new circle of friends was Jan Křížek, a tall and hard-drinking twenty-five-year-old with a mop of unkempt blond hair. Yuri first met him at a barbecue in the countryside and a few days later caught up with Jan and his girlfriend in Prague. Křížek was obsessed with Jan Palach’s self-immolation and told Yuri he wanted to follow in Palach’s footsteps. ‘Palach is a Czech hero now, everyone knows his name, and soon everyone will know Křížek too,’ he boasted. He told Yuri he was going to set himself on fire on 21 August, to mark the one-year anniversary of the Soviet invasion. Yuri wasn’t sure if this was a real plan or drunken bravado, but felt he had no choice but to report it. Soon after, Dimka telephoned Yuri directly at his apartment, an unusual breach of *konspiratsiya* even by his lax standards, and demanded Yuri meet him in the city centre. Dimka wanted more information about Křížek; once he had the details he needed, he departed swiftly into the night.

One by one, the remaining lights of free thought and debate in Czechoslovak society were snuffed out. A year after the Soviet invasion,

the re-establishment of hard-line control, referred to by the Orwellian term ‘normalisation’, was nearly complete. The muted protests that took place on the anniversary were brutally suppressed; they were the last major demonstrations in Czechoslovakia until the Velvet Revolution two decades later finally accomplished what the Prague Spring had started. As for Křížek, Dimka cheerfully informed Yuri that he had been arrested and committed to a psychiatric institution.[23] Many of the others whom Yuri sent reports on fared little better. The singer Karel Kryl managed to leave Czechoslovakia in 1969 and sought asylum in West Germany. Jiří Hochman was fired from all his journalism posts and exiled to a small village where he worked as a welder and truck driver until he was jailed in 1972.[24]

Yuri felt sorry for the people he had informed on. He liked many of them. But he was not particularly troubled by the work. He had devised a mental workaround to assuage his sense of guilt: all he was doing was providing an accurate record of their thoughts, fears and plans, as required of him by the Centre. How could anyone accuse him of deception or betrayal when he was working meticulously to uncover the truth?

Crushing the Prague Spring dealt a heavy blow to the moral legitimacy of the Soviet Union across the globe. Even for supporters, it was painfully clear that the official rhetoric around the events in Czechoslovakia was a shabby inversion of the truth. The Soviets had crushed a genuine reform movement, not liberated the country from reactionaries as they claimed. It also marked the end point of the weak hope among dissidents within the Soviet Union that the post-Stalin ‘thaw’ might blossom into real reform. The invasion caused ‘a nervous breakdown for the whole generation’, said the novelist Vasily Aksyonov.[25]

For Directorate S, however, the events in Czechoslovakia were a great success. In the space of a year and a half, the KGB sent twenty-seven illegals to Prague, many on multiple trips. They had provided analysis of the situation on the ground and served as an early warning system against potential threats. Importantly, none of them were uncovered and none lost their nerve, whatever misgivings they might have harboured privately.

The results of the longer-term ‘sleeper’ illegals in capitalist countries seemed unimpressive by comparison. An internal report complained that these spies had become ‘inert’ and lacked initiative. Over the past two decades, Directorate S had focused on ensuring the security of long-term deployments in the West while sidelining the actual espionage. Long-term illegals had become scared of real operative work, the report claimed.[26]

Now the success of Operation Progress had provided a template for a more proactive kind of espionage. It prompted the KGB to strengthen the Seventh Department of Directorate S, which ran a group of Moscow-based illegals who were sent on short-term missions to handle crisis situations. These spies could handle agents and focus on immediate espionage needs, while sleeper illegals would play the long game, blending into Western society and waiting to be activated should war break out. Before long, the Seventh Department had thirty-nine active illegals on its books, ready to travel on missions at short notice.[27] Their primary focus was the capitalist world, but Prague had shown that illegals could also be useful inside the Soviet bloc. Operation Progress was expanded to cover even those socialist countries with which the Soviet Union ostensibly had close relations, and short-term missions continued for the next two decades. In Hungary, the Centre was obsessed with supposed ‘Zionist’ influence among the party and intellectual elite. In Yugoslavia, illegals travelled to Kosovo to investigate tension between Serbs and Albanians. In Poland, illegals took a particular interest in the Catholic Church. They attempted to get close to several influential religious figures, including the circle of Karol Wojtyła, archbishop of Kraków, who would later become Pope John Paul II.[28]

Other Seventh Department illegals carried out the kind of military reconnaissance a Soviet diplomat would never be able to pull off without raising suspicion. One spent a decade travelling the globe disguised as a Belgian citizen, collecting information for use if the Cold War turned hot. In Northern Ireland, he searched for suitable places for parachute landings, and in Scotland he looked at where local Communists might be able to build ‘resistance bases’. In Turkey, Hong Kong and Canada he reviewed possible locations for amphibious landings, and in Greece he scoped out places that could be used as makeshift runways for airdrops of special forces. Later, he travelled the length of the US–Canada border,

looking for the best places to make clandestine crossings.[29] Other illegals left hidden caches of weapons and explosives outside European cities.[30]

When Yuri Linov returned from Prague in the autumn of 1969, he was told he would join the Seventh Department, given that his wife, Tamara, had failed her training programme, and the pair could no longer be sent abroad as a couple. The KGB gave Yuri and Tamara an apartment in Serebryany Bor, a pleasant suburb of northern Moscow, where they would live with their daughter Natalia, now five, and newly born Karina. In the summer, they had use of a KGB dacha, close to the forest and with a housekeeper to help with the cooking. For the first time, they were all together, but family life was far from normal. Tamara still seemed mentally and physically unwell after her ordeal in the training programme. Yuri was only allowed to discuss his work while inside a *konskvartira* with his curator, and was banned from visiting bars and restaurants, or making friends outside the KGB.[31]

Yuri retained his Karl-Bernd Motl identity for his frequent trips abroad. He memorised passwords, addresses and dead drop locations for upcoming travels in various apartments scattered across Moscow. He made two visits to Poland on Operation Progress missions, and sometimes he was ordered to Copenhagen, Stockholm or Helsinki to deliver a package or an envelope. He was never told anything about the identity of the agent he had to meet or the contents of the package. Instead, he would pick up the package without engaging in conversation, then hand it over in a dead drop or a ‘brush pass’ with a legal KGB officer. The KGB varied the routes that Yuri and other Seventh Department illegals used to enter the West: either the hydrofoil along the Danube from Budapest to Vienna, the Friedrichstrasse crossing between East and West Berlin, or stowing away on a Soviet ship before sneaking out in Copenhagen or Antwerp.[32] For Operation Progress missions, Yuri first crossed into the West on interim documents, switched there to his Motl passport, and then returned to the socialist bloc.

On one occasion, Yuri was sent to Naples to retrieve a package from a dead drop and bring it to Rome. He assumed the package was from a KGB source in the US Sixth Fleet, based in Naples, but that was only a

guess. If he were ever arrested, he would not be able to betray his sources. He did not know anything about them.

Yuri hoped that after a number of these short trips, the bosses might resurrect the plan to send him to America. But Yuri Drozdov, the deputy head of Directorate S, had other ideas. He wanted Yuri to become the KGB's leading specialist on 'the Zionist question', working in Israel and on Jewish issues elsewhere. Drozdov told Yuri he needed to learn Hebrew and Arabic; he gave him audiocassettes and books on the two languages and a deadline of three months to be fluent in both.

'I've got a wife and kids to take care of, how am I going to manage this?' asked Yuri incredulously.

'If you want, we can evict them,' Drozdov replied, with a smirk.

Yuri was so irritated that for once he got angry. He spoke fluent German and English, and decent French, he told Drozdov. Learning two non-European languages he had never spoken a word of before was a ridiculous ask. Drozdov looked at him with admonishment.

'And what about the cosmonauts?'

'What about them?'

'Do the cosmonauts complain about weightlessness? No, because it's their natural working environment. And this is your natural working environment. So stop moaning and learn the languages.'

16

The Mobile Resident:

On Assignment in Israel

In the autumn of 1970, Yuri made his first visit to Israel. His task was simply to spend a week in the country, getting his bearings. The espionage would come later. The trip came at a time of crisis for Soviet–Israeli relations, which had been slowly deteriorating over the past two decades. When Israel was founded in 1948, Stalin had expected the Jewish state to be a natural ally because of the Soviet Union's contribution to the defeat of Nazi Germany and due to the sizeable contingent of leftists among the early Zionists. Stalin also ensured that there were numerous KGB informers among the first Soviet Jews permitted to leave the Soviet Union and immigrate to Israel.[1] In a sign of friendship, Golda Meir travelled to the Soviet Union in 1948 using the first ever Israeli-issued passport to open the embassy and join a crowd of fifty thousand people at the Moscow synagogue on the first day of Rosh Hashanah.[2] But before long, Israel's growing links with the United States, combined with the clamour for emigration among a population of more than two million Soviet Jews, ended the friendly relations. Stalin became paranoid about supposed Zionist influence. In December 1952, he told a meeting of the Central Committee that 'every Jew is a potential spy for the United States'. Soon after, many Jewish doctors were arrested, accused of being part of a 'corrupt Jewish bourgeois nationalist organization' and planning to assassinate the Soviet leader.

After Stalin's death, the Centre's obsession with antisemitic conspiracy theories faded but did not disappear. Numerous Operation Progress missions in the Soviet bloc were focused on identifying allegedly subversive 'Zionist elements'.[3] At the same time, the Soviet Union courted the Arab states. The anti-Zionist obsession increased in intensity after the Six-Day War in 1967. One Soviet book published in

1969 described the basis of Zionism as ‘bellicose chauvinism and anti-Communism’ and claimed the movement was driven by ‘the wealthy Jewish bourgeoisie closely allied with monopoly capital in the United States and other imperialist countries’.[4]

Moscow feared Israel’s supposed influence across the globe, but the KGB’s opportunities to plant agents there were crippled by the decision to cut diplomatic relations. Without an embassy, the KGB could support only a couple of informal agents working inside the small Russian Orthodox Church mission in Jerusalem. There continued to be agents among the small number of KGB-vetted Jews who were allowed to emigrate, but many of these people agreed to cooperate in order to be allowed to leave the country, only to break off all contact when they arrived in Israel. The KGB turned to its illegals to fill the gap.

Yuri landed in Tel Aviv and travelled straight to Jerusalem. He spent hours walking through the Old City, and paid visits to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the Western Wall and the Temple Mount, the holy site for three religions. During the Six-Day War, Israel had captured territory from Egypt, Jordan and Syria, gaining control of the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Before then, Jerusalem had been divided by barbed wire and walls separating the areas under Israeli and Jordanian control; now for the first time in a generation it was whole again, but the atmosphere was tense. There were frequent protests among the seventy thousand Arab residents of East Jerusalem over increasing attempts to impose Israeli law, including the levy of an Israeli defence tax. Jeeps of Israeli paramilitaries cruised the neighbourhoods.[5]

One afternoon, Yuri met an Italian monk who invited him to stay at his monastery in the eastern part of the city. The pair spent several evenings drinking wine, and the monk talked to Yuri about the privations of monastic life and the decision to devote his life so completely to serving God. This idea of a life defined by unstinting duty resonated with the ‘Austrian insurance salesman’ more than the monk could have realised.

Over the next two years, the Centre sent four other illegals, posing as a Canadian, a Spaniard, a Mexican and a Finn, into Israel for short trips. Yuri was earmarked to coordinate all this work. At a *konskvartira* in Moscow, he met his new curator, Vladimir Lokhov. A tall man in his mid-

forties with dashing looks and a warm smile, Lokhov exuded the charm of a former illegal, Yuri believed, though Lokhov did not tell him anything about his cover identity or past missions. Had Yuri been able to read Lokhov's file, he would have found out that his new curator was a native of Ossetia, a region of the North Caucasus with a local language distantly related to Persian. He joined Directorate S in 1957, and he was sent to the historic city of Isfahan to work at the Soviet mission and perfect his Persian. Later, he assumed the identity of Hassanpour Nazali, an Iranian who had died as a boy in 1934. In an audacious gambit to strengthen his cover, he visited Nazali's home village, found the mother of his double, who by this point was elderly, frail and blind, and introduced himself as her long-lost son. The old woman beckoned him toward her and ran her hands over his face, before announcing that indeed her son had returned. She was overcome with emotion and invited him into her humble home. The Soviet illegal stayed there for some days, cleaning the unkempt house. Later, he regularly sent his 'mother' money to help with upkeep. Lokhov spent years living in Hong Kong and Pakistan as Nazali, a businessman with interests in the export of minerals and the import of film reels. His wife, Nonna, like Yuri's wife, Tamara, had not coped with the psychological pressures of illegal life, and she remained in Moscow while her husband travelled the world. Eventually, he returned to Moscow to work as a trainer for illegals who would be dispatched to the Middle East.[6]

Yuri took an instinctive liking to his new handler. He explained to Lokhov that he was not getting on that well with Hebrew, even though he had spent weeks studying all day and even falling asleep with a tape recorder playing Hebrew radio broadcasts next to his pillow. He made the case that even though Karl Bernd-Motl was now to become Jewish, according to his legend he had never spent any significant time in Israel, and most new immigrants there did not speak Hebrew either. An Austrian Jewish insurance agent who already spoke fluent Hebrew might even provoke suspicion. Wouldn't it be better for him to learn Hebrew when already in situ? The story could be that Motl, inspired by the Israeli victory in the Six-Day War, had felt the calling of his Jewish heritage and decided to travel to Israel to attend an ulpan, a Hebrew school set up for just this purpose.

Lokhov conceded it was a good idea, and after some discussion Yuri's plan was approved. Lokhov and Yuri devised a touching addition to the Motl legend: he acquired a Jewish grandmother, a Holocaust survivor whom he did not meet until just before she died, when she was old and blind. According to this newly spun yarn, when Motl tracked down his grandmother, she ran her hands over his face, recognised him as her own kin, and with tears in her eyes voiced one dying wish: that her grandson embrace his Jewishness and not permit the Jewish line of the family to die with her. Lokhov suggested the outline of this story to Yuri, without mentioning that he had adapted it from his own experience.

Yuri had a bank account in Munich in Motl's name, but he did not know if he would be able to access it in Israel, so he was to take a large amount of cash, hidden in a secret compartment in his suitcase. To open it, he had to press three concealed buttons in a specific order. The compartment would then spring open, revealing the dollars and the onetime pads he would use to decode radio messages. Lokhov gave him diagrams to memorise that showed the location of a section of wall running along an alleyway in the Old City of Jerusalem where he was to stash some of the cash behind a loose brick. The money would be retrieved by a very important agent, Lokhov told Yuri.[7]

He also gave Yuri details about another KGB agent, with the code name Leon. He was due to pass over important intelligence from the Golan Heights, near the highly militarised line of control with Syria. Leon had been recruited while visiting his sister in the Soviet Union, and the KGB had promised him that if he cooperated, she would eventually be allowed to emigrate and join him in Israel. Yuri was to locate Leon and reactivate him.

There was one final matter that had to be taken care of, to bolster Karl-Bernd Motl's new, Jewish legend. Yuri reported to the KGB clinic on Second Pekhotnaya Street in northern Moscow, where the surgeons had been told their patient had developed severe phimosis, a rare condition in adult men in which it becomes extremely painful to pull back the foreskin. They had no choice but to operate.

A few weeks later, once recovered from the surgery, Yuri boarded the weekly flight from Helsinki to Tehran, during its stopover in the Soviet capital. From Tehran, he flew to Rome, where he picked up his Karl-

Bernd Motl passport, then to Nicosia, and from there he booked a ticket for the short flight to Tel Aviv.[8] He arrived in Israel during the baking heat of June and immediately visited the Ministry of Immigration. He recited his rehearsed words about the call of his Jewish ancestry, and charmed his way onto a five-month course at Ulpan Etzion in Jerusalem, known as the best Hebrew school in the country. Not wanting to live on-site like most of the other students, because it would be harder to receive his weekly radio messages there, he rented a room in West Jerusalem and took the bus to the ulpan each morning. His landlady was an elderly woman from Lviv who had no idea that her lodger could understand everything she muttered before him in Ukrainian.

Yuri's days at Ulpan Etzion offered a mixture of Hebrew tuition and acclimatisation to Israeli life. Golda Meir and other politicians came to address the new students and thank them for making the decision to move to Israel. The teacher, in between Hebrew grammar points, exhorted the class to remain in Israel and to procreate. It was their duty, she said, to have at least four children each, to prevent Arabs from defeating them through sheer force of numbers. Yuri's class was a friendly mix of Jews from across the world who had relocated to Israel to start a new life. Anne had come from America to marry a Yemeni Orthodox man and seemed nervous about what she was getting herself into. There was a fiery woman from Argentina who was the life and soul of the class, and there was Miriam, a passionate Zionist from Iran with long curly hair and a visceral dislike of Arabs. There was one Soviet Jew in the group, who had been allowed to emigrate a year previously and regaled the class with tales of how Jews were persecuted in the Soviet Union. There was an American couple who worked as shorthand transcription clerks for international conferences. And then there was Karl-Bernd Motl, the Austrian Jewish insurance salesman who, after classes were over, spent long hours writing profiles of his fellow classmates in invisible ink.

Yuri told the other students that he had been raised Protestant, but had undergone an epiphany when he met his elderly, blind grandmother, a Holocaust survivor. Lokhov's recycled tale made quite an impression on those who heard it. Miriam took a particular shine to him, and they became close. One night she whispered to Yuri that she had contacts in the Israeli security services who were interested in expanding their

networks abroad; was he interested? The introduction could lead to a potential intelligence gold mine, but Yuri knew that it would involve background checks. He told Miriam he was a pacifist and had to decline the offer.

One hot summer night, Yuri drove north to Kiryat Shmona on the edge of the Golan Heights, near to the kibbutz where Leon lived.

'I've come to say hello from our common friends,' Yuri said in Russian.

Leon replied in broken Russian, and then they switched to a mix of English, Hebrew and Yiddish, much of which Yuri could understand thanks to his fluent German. Leon's real name was Shlomo Ben Yehuda; he had fought with the British army in World War II and later joined the Israeli military police. Now, in his mid-fifties, he worked for a construction company engaged near the Syrian border, and he had numerous contacts among the IDF troops guarding the frontier.[9] For the KGB, his task was to supply military documents, maps of where IDF detachments were located, and any other intelligence about the border he could find. Yuri handed a stack of cash to Ben Yehuda, and in return he received an envelope of documents. Ben Yehuda asked if Yuri knew when his sister would be allowed to emigrate; Yuri apologised and said he didn't, but promised to ask.

Driving back to Jerusalem late in the night, Yuri felt on edge. This was different from anything he had done before. In Ireland, Austria, Prague and elsewhere, he had tracked people down, charmed them, and extracted information. But he had always done so as Motl, the innocent Austrian insurance agent. This was the first time he had identified himself as a Soviet operative to a source, and it introduced a new level of risk. In the next days, his unease grew every time he heard someone speaking Russian. He feared he might run into Nyuma Rakhovsky, one of his old boxing partners in Kyiv, who had since immigrated to Israel. He had visions of hearing Nyuma's booming voice yelling out, 'Holy shit! Yura! What are you doing here?' Worrying about such encounters filled Yuri with a constant low-grade buzz of tension.

There were cheap plane tickets to Cyprus from Tel Aviv, and Yuri suggested to his fellow students it might be fun to spend a long weekend

there. A group from the ulpan went for a couple of days to lounge on the beach, drink cocktails, and, in Yuri's case, slip away to meet his curator Lokhov, who had flown in using his Iranian identity. As they took a walk through the centre of town, Lokhov told him the information Ben Yehuda provided had been judged by the Centre to be of exceptional value.

Back in Israel, Yuri continued his lessons. He read *Haaretz* and the *Jerusalem Post* each morning, and he attended public lectures at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Once a week, he drafted a report on Israeli politics. He befriended some Sephardic Jews and noticed a resentment among many of the darker-skinned Israelis against the Ashkenazi majority. He wrote one of his reports about Ovadia Yosef, the chief Sephardic rabbi, suggesting the Centre play on these feelings of resentment and try to recruit him under a false flag.

At the end of the five-month course, Yuri finished top of his class. He bade farewell to his friends and took a boat from Haifa to Genoa, with a stop in Athens, and from there to Rome, Vienna, Budapest and Moscow. When he arrived back home, Lokhov told him that Ben Yehuda's intelligence had helped prevent a war between Israel and Syria and saved the Soviet Union billions of roubles, though he was never told why or how. Yuri received a medal for bravery in the field, and Lokhov informed him that Andropov had requested a personal meeting.

Yuri's encounter with the KGB chairman took place in a *konskvartira* a block away from Lubyanka; he had the impression the building had a secret entrance from an underground tunnel, which allowed Andropov to arrive straight from his office without emerging into the streets of Moscow. Andropov was in a cheerful mood, noting that their birthdays were just one day apart and they were both named Yuri.

'You have a very lively writing style,' Andropov said, signalling that he was personally reading Yuri's reports. They chatted for some time about Israel, Yuri's work there, and the conditions on the ground. Yuri shared his views on Israeli politics, but he also gently reminded Andropov that he had originally been meant for deployment to America, and he hoped that was still in the cards. Andropov inclined his head impenetrably. The meeting finished with a toast, to celebrate Yuri's medal.

Over the next few months, Yuri was dispatched on a series of short missions: to Marseilles, Zurich and Vienna, driven by the KGB's belief that there was an international Zionist conspiracy directed against the Soviet Union. Yuri's task was to make inroads into local Jewish communities and investigate their attitudes to Israel and the Soviet Union. He developed a pleasant routine of arriving in a city, buying all the newspapers and reading them in a café, then engaging in small talk with Jewish shopkeepers. After a week or two, he slipped from West Berlin to East Berlin, or stowed aboard a Soviet cargo ship in Antwerp, and headed back home. These days, Tamara bade him farewell with a weary resignation; he had stopped telling her where he was headed, in the hope she would worry less, and she had stopped asking. Yuri also played the role of an agent handler for the first time, setting up a series of meetings with Ben Yehuda in Copenhagen, Zurich and Rome. The Israeli told friends at home he was travelling to Europe to see relatives. Their meetings grew progressively less friendly; Ben Yehuda demanded more and more money while handing over a diminishing quantity of worthwhile intelligence. On one occasion, Yuri gave Ben Yehuda his own wristwatch as a gift, just to stop him moaning. After all, Ben Yehuda was his first real agent, and the Centre seemed to be pleased with his information even if Yuri increasingly doubted its importance. He wanted to keep their relations convivial.

Eventually, the plan was for Yuri to buy an apartment in Nicosia and make more frequent trips into Israel. He would be the 'mobile resident' for Israel, running the entire network of KGB operatives in the country while being largely based outside its borders. At the beginning of 1973, Lokhov told Yuri to prepare for another visit to Israel to lay the groundwork. It would be his last trip as an illegal.

Yuri was due to leave Moscow early in the morning of 3 February 1973, the day after Tamara's thirty-first birthday. He had missed many of her birthdays, and they planned a romantic dinner at home to celebrate the fact that, for once, they could spend it together. But first, he had to visit a *konskvartira* for a short meeting with Lokhov and Anatoly Lazarev, the abrasive overall head of Directorate S.

Lokhov went over the final plans. Yuri was to travel to Dimona, the town closest to Israel's secretive nuclear facility, and reactivate a

Romanian Jewish agent, code name Petrescu, who had worked for the KGB in Bucharest but gone off the radar since emigrating. Lokhov explained that after this trip Yuri would be assigned to oversee even more agents from the KGB's network in Israel, including the ambassador of a Latin American country in Tel Aviv and a West German diplomat.[10] For this mission, however, he was to focus on the Romanian, and he had to travel to Dimona without attracting any attention.

Having memorised names, locations, addresses and various other operational details, Yuri was keen to get back home and celebrate Tamara's birthday with her. But Lazarev kept him a while longer.

'I heard you're supposed to be good at chess. I bet I can beat you,' Lazarev said, setting up a board and pouring a couple shots of vodka. Yuri won easily, and Lazarev reset the board for another game.

'I have to go, it's Tamara's birthday,' pleaded Yuri.

'You're not leaving here until I beat you,' Lazarev snapped back.

Lazarev was not easy to argue with. He liked to wear his KGB uniform to work, demonstratively wield his power over subordinates, and lecture them on Marxism–Leninism. 'How do you propose to explain that to the working class?' was his favoured way of expressing disapproval with an idea.[11]

The sensible thing for Yuri to do now was to lose graciously and take his leave, but his competitive spirit kicked in, and he beat Lazarev over and over. Lazarev grew drunk, increasingly annoyed, and insistent that he would win in the end. Yuri finally got home around two in the morning, to find his wife's birthday dinner congealed on the table and Tamara in tears. The KGB car that brought him home waited outside with the engine running. He apologised to Tamara as profusely as he could while rushing around the flat collecting his things. He had an hour to pack Karl-Bernd Motl's suitcase, running his fingers over the seams of the clothes to make sure there were no Moscow dry cleaning tags or any other telltale signs of his Soviet life. Then he kissed Tamara goodbye and ran out of the door into the icy Moscow night. He put his suitcase into the boot of the car, and the driver set off for the Chkalovsky military airfield. There he boarded a cargo plane to Budapest.

A couple of weeks later, Yuri had criss-crossed Europe and changed passports a couple of times. He was waiting at the boarding gate in Nicosia Airport for his flight to Tel Aviv. He saw a man waiting for the

same flight and also travelling alone. He was tall and blond and looked a bit lost. Yuri thought he looked Irish, so he walked over to strike up conversation.

'Are you from *cuígí*, my friend?' he asked, using a Gaelic word he had picked up in Dublin.[12] The man looked at him, confused. Yuri tried again.

'Are you a Paddy?'

'Oh no, I'm British. Hargreaves is the name. John Hargreaves,' said the man, proffering a hand. Hargreaves turned out to be a chauffeur who was taking time off work to visit biblical sites in Israel. From their brief interaction, Yuri found Hargreaves to be well meaning and amenable, but a man with little sense of humour and of limited intelligence – everything he was looking for in an unwitting partner in espionage. He told Hargreaves that he was an insurance agent headed to Israel for a few weeks on business and that he planned to visit various cities around the country for meetings. He suggested they travel together. He would pay for the car and petrol, and Hargreaves would do the driving. They would both get to see the sights of Israel, and he would just need to stop off now and then. Hargreaves liked the idea and agreed. Yuri was pleased with the outcome: what could be more innocent than two friends touring the historic sights of the Holy Land?

When they landed in Tel Aviv, Yuri and Hargreaves checked into the Grand Beach Hotel, just next to the seafront near one of the most popular city beaches. The next day, they rented a car. Hargreaves was an excellent driver, useful in some of the more rural areas where the roads were in bad shape. They drove north to the Golan Heights, where Yuri slipped off to meet Ben Yehuda, and then south to the Dead Sea, stopping off at Mount Sodom and other biblical sites. Yuri told Hargreaves that on the way back to Tel Aviv he wanted to make a quick stop in Dimona for another business meeting. The uncurious Hargreaves was happy to take the opportunity to snooze in the car.

Yuri made his way to an apartment building in Dimona where he had been told the Romanian agent Petrescu was living. He knocked on the door and was met by a man who looked to be about fifty. Yuri could see past him into the room where three or four women were sitting and laughing.

‘It’s great to see you again; let’s go outside and chat. It’s been a while since we’ve been in touch,’ said Yuri, hoping that Petrescu would understand the implication. The man nodded and suggested they go for a walk. When alone on the street, Yuri asked if he could come back to see him on another day. They set a new meeting, for the park in Dimona, and a few days later, Hargreaves made the drive again. This time, Yuri handed Petrescu a pad for invisible writing along with addresses to which he was to mail the letters, and asked if he was able to travel, because it would be preferable to meet him outside Israel. Petrescu said he did not think that would be possible.

Yuri had the impression, from what Lokhov had told him, that Petrescu had arrived recently from Romania, where the Communist dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu had a policy of allowing Jews to emigrate in return for cash payments from the Israeli state.[13] Petrescu told Yuri he worked in a textile factory, which Yuri assumed was code for a job in Israel’s nuclear programme. The reactor near Dimona, first activated in 1963, was cloaked in secrecy, and the government had jokingly referred to it as a textile plant on occasion. On the other hand, there really was a textile factory in Dimona too. Yuri never did find out whether his agent was a highly placed source in Israel’s nuclear programme or a low-level worker involved in the production of curtains.

Not long after Yuri and Hargreaves returned to Tel Aviv, things started to go wrong. Yuri could not find his passport anywhere; he ransacked his hotel room, but it had disappeared. He dutifully went to the Austrian embassy in Tel Aviv to report the missing document and request a replacement. On leaving the embassy, he spotted two men mending a pipe across the street. Something about them looked unnatural, he thought. Two days later, the hotel told him police had called to return the passport after a well-intentioned citizen had found it in the street and turned it in.

Yuri’s internal alarm was ringing loudly. That evening, he told Hargreaves that his plans had changed, and dispatched the confused Englishman off to the airport, telling him to leave the country as soon as possible. But following protocol, he did not want to make a sudden dash himself. If he was under surveillance, doing so would only confirm suspicions. He moved to the Accadia Hotel in Herzliya, an upmarket

district of northern Tel Aviv, and made sure not to do anything that an innocent Austrian insurance salesman would not.

A few days later, there was a knock at the door of his hotel room. A female voice sounded from the corridor; there was a problem with the plumbing, she said, and a handyman needed to check the pipes.

‘One minute,’ Yuri called out.

He grabbed the tiny onetime pads that contained his decryption codes and started flushing them down the toilet. At the sound of the flush, there was an almighty crash. The door was kicked open, and operatives from the Shin Bet, Israel’s counterintelligence service, stormed into the room.[14]

In fact, the Shin Bet had been following Yuri for two weeks. They were the ones who had swiped his passport so they could identify him, and on 3 March they decided to make their move. His arrest had been personally approved by Golda Meir. At the airport, Hargreaves had been detained and stripped naked, while agents tore apart his clothes at the seams and cut open his luggage, searching for any secrets he might have been smuggling out with him. In the end, it became clear he was just as clueless as he claimed to be, and they released him.[15]

Yuri, sitting in his hotel room wearing a blue sweatshirt, protested his innocence in English, German and Hebrew. There must have been a terrible misunderstanding, he said. He was Karl-Bernd Motl, he was here on business, and he had been travelling around the country enjoying the sights with his new English friend. But the Israelis were not about to let him off lightly. One of the younger men asked him, in Russian, to sit down.

‘Sorry, I do not understand Russian,’ Yuri replied in English.

The interrogator kept speaking in Russian, nevertheless. After some hours of back-and-forth, the men took Yuri to a safe house in the north of the city, which was equipped with hidden microphones and cameras.

‘We don’t want to destroy you. We know you don’t hate us,’ said one of the men, in English. He poured Yuri a whisky. Yuri pushed it back across the table, fearing it was spiked.[16] His training in Moscow had been quite clear: for as long as possible, do not eat or drink anything offered when under interrogation.

Yuri’s wall of denial began to crack when one of the Israelis put on the table a photograph of him in Helsinki, with a man he recognised from one of his passport switches in transit.

‘We know that this man works in the KGB residency in Helsinki. If you’re not a KGB spy, then what were you doing with him?’

All illegals had an *otstupnaya legenda*, a ‘backup legend’, to be used if they were caught and faced with incontrovertible evidence of espionage. In Yuri’s case, he was to admit that yes, Karl-Bernd Motl did work for Moscow, but now he was willing to become an Israeli double agent. This would buy him time and hopefully his release. Under no circumstances was he to reveal that he was a Soviet citizen or give his real name. Faced with the incriminating photograph, Yuri admitted he worked for the KGB and suggested he might be open to cooperation with the Israelis. But his interrogators were relentless, insistent that they knew he was a Russian. Finally, Yuri gave up. In a quiet voice, he admitted he was a Soviet citizen and his name was Yuri Linov.

The Israelis later claimed they were surprised at how quickly Yuri broke. They ‘peeled him like an onion’, recalled one investigator, until he started to reveal all kinds of useful information about the KGB. Yuri remembers it differently. It was obvious from the Helsinki photograph that the Israelis knew he was a spy, so he admitted it, but he did not reveal anything the Israelis did not know already. He was only cooperating to help secure his release, he claimed. There was a two-day period during the interrogation that was a black hole in his memory, though, during which Yuri suspected he might have been drugged. Israeli sources say this is merely the excuse of a spy embarrassed to admit that he broke so quickly. With the Israeli archives still closed, the truth is hard to divine.

Any insight into how the KGB ran illegals would have been fascinating intelligence for the Shin Bet and Mossad, given that Israel was the only other country in the world to run something similar to the Soviet illegals programme, albeit on a smaller scale. Like the early Soviet Union, Israel had the ingredients that made using illegals necessary: a new and uncertain state whose right to exist was not universally recognised, surrounded by powerful neighbours who wanted to see it obliterated. It also had the resources: citizens and supporters who came from across the globe and spoke many languages. Some Mossad

operatives posed as non-Jewish businessmen from their origin country, while a secret unit known as the Arab Platoon recruited Jews who could pass for Arabs and dispatched them across the Arab world.[17]

After several weeks of interrogation, the Israelis told Yuri his case would proceed to trial. He never found out how the Israelis had uncovered him. Ben Yehuda was unlikely to be the culprit, as he had been arrested along with Yuri and was also jailed for espionage. Had Petrescu sold him out? It was possible: he did not appear at Yuri's trial, his name was never made public, and Israeli sources remain tight-lipped about where he worked and what happened to him afterwards. But then there was the question of how the Israelis had got hold of the photograph of Yuri in Helsinki. Had the Line N man been careless and not shaken off surveillance before meeting with Yuri? Or was there a mole in the Centre?

Yuri would have plenty of time to ponder that question in prison. He was sentenced to eighteen years at a closed hearing in August 1973, and sent to Ramla, a high-security jail that housed some of Israel's most dangerous criminals. A decade earlier, Adolf Eichmann had been hanged there, after he was kidnapped by the Mossad in Argentina, put on trial in Jerusalem, and found guilty of involvement in organising the Holocaust.

A deal was done a year into Yuri's sentence. The Israelis demanded the release of sixteen Soviet Jews, who had been arrested for a 1970 plot to hijack a plane and fly it out of Soviet airspace in a doomed attempt to escape to Israel. The KGB dismissed this as an unequal swap, but agreed to release the only woman among the would-be hijackers, Sylva Zalmanson, as well as a Bulgarian Jew who had been sentenced to death for espionage. They also agreed to the release of two Soviet Jews currently serving time in the Gulag. Both sides agreed that there would be no publicity around the swap, and nothing about Yuri's arrest or release was ever made public.[18]

An Israeli chaperone flew with Yuri on a commercial flight from Tel Aviv to Frankfurt and then on to West Berlin, where they stayed the night in a hotel, sharing a room to ensure he did not try to escape. Early the next morning, they made their way to the Friedrichstrasse Station, where Karl-Bernd Motl had frequently slipped between East and West. Now, in a nervy scene overseen by armed men on either side, he walked alone

along a deserted platform underground, toward a group of people he could only faintly see in the gloom. He did not get a look at the people walking past him in the other direction. From Friedrichstrasse, Yuri was taken to the KGB base at Karlshorst, where he was given a medical check-up, and then he was put on a plane to Moscow. At the airport, he was greeted by a glum handler who told him he would be escorted to a KGB dacha.

All returning illegals were treated with some degree of suspicion by their spymasters in Moscow, particularly those who had spent time under interrogation. The KGB had spent years training these people to hide their true allegiances and lie with ease. What if they had now turned their charms against their former masters? Rudolf Abel was one example: he had been feted on his arrival back in the Soviet Union and entered the canon of legendary Soviet spies, and yet his direct bosses could not shake the fear that he had been turned while in American custody. They were so suspicious that when Abel was on his deathbed in 1971, the head of Directorate S ordered that a listening device be placed by his side, in case he revealed anything in feverish mumblings during his final hours.[19]

Yuri now faced similar suspicions. Why had he disclosed that he was a Soviet illegal to his Israeli captors? How much had he given away? Yuri's chief interrogator was a man he had never met before, a heavy-drinking mole hunter called Sergei Zakharov, tasked with finding out if Yuri was telling the truth about his time in Israel.[20] Zakharov ordered Yuri to write a full account of everything that happened during his time in Israel, from the moment of his arrival to his arrest and interrogation. It ran to more than a hundred handwritten pages. Two weeks later, he had to write it all over again. And then a third time. Zakharov pored over these three versions and quizzed Yuri over small inconsistencies. He was deeply suspicious of Hargreaves, even when Yuri explained that he had approached the Englishman at the airport, not the other way around, making it very unlikely that Hargreaves had been a plant, as Zakharov seemed to think.

Yuri was kept away from Tamara, who had recently given birth to the couple's third daughter. On occasion, he was driven to the same KGB clinic where he had been circumcised and brought into a room with a lie detector. He had to answer the same questions repeatedly with wires

attached to his hands. After several months, Zakharov told Yuri he should travel to Kyiv and wait there until Andropov was ready to decide on his fate. Yuri thought the whole situation was absurd. He was still only thirty-six years old, and it was ridiculous to waste all his years of training. He could be used as an illegal with a new identity, he suggested, perhaps in an Arab country that had no relations with Israel. He offered to write a pitch note that could be forwarded to Andropov.

'Listen to me,' Zakharov said sternly. 'You have three daughters and an ill wife. Think about them, and sit quietly in Kyiv. Otherwise you'll be sent to the nuthouse with no right of correspondence, and everyone will just say you went mad.'

In November 1975, Yuri was called back to Moscow to see Andropov at a *konskvartira* on Kirov Street by Lubyanka.

'What will you have to drink?' Andropov asked.

'Nothing, because I value your time too much,' answered Yuri courteously.

Andropov told Yuri he found it hard to believe that the Americans had not questioned him while he was in Israeli custody, but he did not appear to be angry. He said Yuri's party membership would be restored, but his career as an illegal was over. Andropov was polite but distracted and keen to end the meeting; there was none of the friendly camaraderie that marked their first encounter. The KGB chairman was wearing a large bandage around his midriff and appeared to be in pain. He was already suffering from kidney problems that would gradually worsen.

Yuri went back to Kyiv, and Tamara followed with the children. He was given a job in an institute for international affairs, and he continued to work for the KGB on the side, preparing Soviet Jews who had shown willingness to cooperate with the KGB ahead of their emigration to Israel. He also worked as a guide on cruises for foreign tourists on the Dnipro River, writing reports on promising targets for KGB recruitment. He was banned from telling anyone about his former life as an illegal, even his new KGB colleagues in Kyiv. Four years after the move to Kyiv, he was trying to fix a broken radiator in the marital bedroom when he found a listening device attached to the wall behind it. The KGB still didn't trust him.

Some days, Yuri swelled with pride at the thought that he had given everything to serve his country during his career as an illegal. On other days, he wondered if it hadn’t all been a terrible waste of a life.

PART FOUR

The Cold War Battlefronts

17

The Baron von Hohenstein:

Undercover in West Germany

In August 1973, as Yuri Linov's secret trial in Israel got under way, back in the Soviet Union people across the country hurried home from work in the evenings to make sure they caught each new episode of *Seventeen Moments of Spring*. The show followed a fictional wartime illegal named Maxim Isayev who, under the cover identity of Max Otto von Stierlitz, infiltrated the upper echelons of the Nazi Party and sniffed out intelligence about a plot by the Americans to negotiate a separate peace with the Nazis at the expense of the Soviet Union. It was a clever fusing of the villains of the past with those of the Cold War, and it introduced the Soviet public to the idea of illegal work. The show was a staple on television every year thereafter and became the most watched series in Soviet history.

Andropov was an early backer of the series, meeting with its author, Iulian Semyonov, and giving him permission to mine KGB archives and interview officers for ideas. He wanted the Soviet people to have a positive view of the KGB's spies abroad and to promote the idea that illegals were dedicated servants to the cause.[1] Isayev was the antithesis of James Bond; he had no gadgets, no fancy weapons and no seduction scenes.[2] Real Soviet heroes, the logic went, should abnegate their own pleasures for the defence of the motherland. In one of the most poignant scenes, Isayev and his wife see each other from afar having spent fifteen years apart, but are able to exchange only silent glances as he remains in character as Stierlitz. A whole generation of young Soviet citizens grew up wanting to be like Stierlitz, including a young man in St Petersburg named Vladimir Putin, who joined the KGB two years after the show's premiere, and later recalled that spy books and movies had taken hold of his imagination. 'What amazed me most of all was how one person's

efforts could achieve what whole armies could not. One spy could decide the fate of thousands of people,' said Putin.[3]

Isayev's mission bore little resemblance to the real work of illegals, but it is possible that a kernel of inspiration for the series came from one of the KGB's most successful illegal missions of the previous years, involving an invented group of Nazi plotters. The mission was overseen by Yuri Drozdov, the deputy head of Directorate S. A former illegal himself, Drozdov took on many different roles throughout his long career, but his cameo as an embittered old Nazi would go down in KGB lore as one of the most remarkable transformations in espionage history.

America was the Main Enemy, but Germany was the beating heart of the Cold War, the place where the Communist and capitalist worlds came face to face. During the 1950s, Moscow received a stream of first-class intelligence about its foes in West Germany from Heinz Felfe, a top official in the BND, West Germany's intelligence service. Felfe, a native of Dresden, was motivated by disgust at the Allied bombing of the city at the end of the war, and he handed the Soviets more than fifteen thousand secret documents about the BND and its allies over the course of a decade. A later CIA damage assessment found that Felfe had given away the names or aliases of more than a hundred CIA staffers, as well as details on countless operations and methods.[4] Felfe was finally arrested in 1961, leaving the KGB with a large intelligence gap. Eventually, they found a way to fill it by learning from the methods of the HVA, East Germany's foreign intelligence agency.

The HVA enjoyed one big advantage over the KGB when it came to illegal work: for infiltration into West Germany, no language training was required. There were differences in lifestyle, clothing and haircuts between East and West Germany, which intensified as the economic and cultural gap between the two countries grew wider, but the HVA's illegals did not require years of language tuition to pass as native in West Germany.

The HVA did share one problem that bedevilled KGB illegals: its operatives could not use their Eastern university qualifications in the West, which meant they had to take up working-class professions, limiting their possibilities for penetrating the political elite. But the HVA's long-standing chief, Markus Wolf, realised there was a

workaround, thanks to the initiative of one HVA illegal, undercover as a travelling shampoo salesman. On a whim, he decided to loiter at the bus stop closest to the chancellery offices in Bonn at the end of the working day and strike up conversations with workers waiting for their ride home. He got chatting with a young woman who turned out to be a secretary in the chancellery, and before long he had turned casual chatter into a series of dates and then a full-on affair. Their pillow talk provided a stream of useful intelligence on the West German government. Wolf realised that secretaries often had access to as much classified material as their bosses, and sometimes even more. He also understood that the post-war shortage of men had left many of the women working in these government offices bored, lonely, and with little chance of meeting a decent partner. He decided to train a supply of charming, thoughtful lovers to fill this gap.

The resulting operatives became known as the Romeo spies, and as the scheme evolved, Wolf began to tailor the biographies of his Romeos for specific targets. Before an approach was made, the Romeo would be given a file listing the habits, likes and dislikes of a potential target, making it easier for him to manipulate her. If a woman held left-wing sympathies, once enough time had elapsed for love to blossom, the Romeo would reveal his East German allegiance and suggest his new partner help him find information. But for those women who would never agree to work for the Communist East, Romeos used a whole array of false flags. Cover identities included a rightwing West German, a physicist working for an international research company committed to world peace, and an intellectually minded Danish journalist.[5]

Wolf shared the intelligence his Romeos gleaned with Moscow, but the KGB also recruited East Germans directly and organised its own Romeo operations. The first of them was launched in 1968 when an illegal managed to engineer a romance with Margret Höke, a secretary in the office of the West German president.[6] The illegal told Höke he was a PhD student who needed documents from the president’s office to help with his dissertation. As time went on, the story wore thin, and the illegal needed another ruse to persuade Höke to keep feeding him documents. He knew his lover was staunchly right-wing and would never agree to spy for East Germany or the KGB. He told her, instead, that he was a representative of an organisation of former Nazi officers based in South America. He needed access to West German government records, he said,

to help in the struggle for a right-wing revival, and he could pay 500 marks a month for information. Höke agreed, wooed by the mix of financial and ideological incentives. She had access to meeting minutes, briefing notes and countless other documents from the president's office. She photographed them all with a tiny camera hidden in a tube of lipstick, then handed over the film to her lover.[7]

It quickly became clear that the false flag of an 'organization of former Nazis' could be a fruitful one for recruiting in the offices of West German officialdom. Many Nazis rebranded themselves as anti-Communists after the war and were welcomed by the Allies as partners in the new battle against the Soviet threat, without too many questions about their pasts. Former Nazi officers featured particularly prominently in the BND, which until 1968 was run by Reinhard Gehlen, formerly the chief of Nazi military intelligence on the eastern front.

The BND residency in Paris, housed in a grand old villa in Saint-Cloud, was headed by Gehlen's son-in-law, Alfred Dürrwanger, a former Wehrmacht major. The KGB heard through sources that Dürrwanger's secretary, Heidrun Hofer, was something of a party animal; she reportedly liked to drink and was relaxed and flirtatious in the office. One day, a young man named Hans Puschke appeared in Heidrun's life.[8] Tall and blond with kindly blue eyes, he was a lively conversationalist and a good listener. Sometimes, he would show up outside her apartment looking sharp in a suit, clutching a bouquet of flowers. The only problem was that Hans had a habit of disappearing for long periods of time, and he never left any contact details. When he did materialise, though, he whisked her away for romantic weekends to the Côte d'Azur, to Marseilles, and even to Athens. In a photograph Heidrun took on one of these trips, Hans looks like a happy and carefree tourist, dressed all in white, camera around his neck, and his face bathed in warm sunlight.

In many ways it was the perfect romance, but Heidrun felt uneasy at her lover's long absences. Eventually, he explained himself. His father was a former SS officer who had fled to South America after the war, and now ran a top-secret organisation of former Nazis, known as the Überlebensträger, 'the survivors'. Hans also worked for the group on clandestine missions around Europe, requiring him to be moving around all the time. But as a sign of his commitment, he proposed to Heidrun

and asked to meet her parents. Soon after, the pair travelled to her home village. Her mother, who had heard all about Hans's habit of disappearing without a trace, was wary of the suitor, but her father was enchanted by him. He had a long chat with Hans about the good old days and found the young man to be a patriotic idealist who appreciated all that the Nazis had done for Germany. He told his daughter he approved of the relationship and that she should do everything she could to help her fiancé. Heidrun began to pass Hans information – so much of it, in fact, that it seemed too good to be true.

In Moscow, the Directorate S bosses suspected something was wrong. Perhaps Heidrun had told her bosses at BND about the approach, and they were using her to plant false information. Drozdov, the deputy head of Directorate S, discussed the matter with Andropov. They decided that the best option would be to send a second illegal who could pose as Hans's father and gauge the credibility of the new agent; if she turned out to be genuine, he could help further bind her to the cause. All that was needed was to find someone who could play the head of the Überlebensträger. Drozdov told Andropov he had the perfect candidate for the job in mind: himself.

Yuri Drozdov was an unusual addition to the leadership at Directorate S, most of whom were career bureaucrats with no experience in the field. He had joined the KGB in 1956 after more than a decade in the army and trained as a German-speaking illegal. Based in East Berlin, he took frequent trips to the West under various cover identities. During negotiations with Rudolf Abel's American lawyer ahead of the spy swap that saw Abel return to the Soviet Union in 1962, Drozdov was called upon to play the role of Abel's distant German relative. Unusually for an illegal, he later shifted to the 'legal' side of the KGB, running spy operations in China from the Soviet embassy there, where he was posted under diplomatic cover. In 1969, he returned to Moscow and was appointed deputy head of Directorate S.

Drozdov's illegal training meant he could be a pleasant conversationalist and put people at ease if he wanted. Under the surface charm, though, he was ruthless and unbending. His eyes could transform from kindly concern to a serpent-like glare in an instant. Back in 1962, when he was posing as Rudolf Abel's cousin, Abel's lawyer James

Donovan described Drozdov as ‘a lean, hard-looking man about fifty-five’, and assumed he was from the East German secret police. Drozdov, at the time, was thirty-six.[9] Fifteen years later, with the same military bearing but his long, craggy face even more aged, he really could pass for an old, embittered Nazi, even though he had been a mere teenager at the end of the war.

In a Moscow archive, Drozdov found the biography of a Wehrmacht officer from an aristocratic family who had perished on the eastern front, the Baron von Hohenstein. He spent weeks inventing a new reality for the baron, one in which he had survived the war and fled to South America. It had been a decade since Drozdov was in the field under German-speaking cover, so he had to work hard to regain his fluency and accent. He read the memoirs of various SS officers, as well as material from interrogations in the KGB archives, and he learned the old Wehrmacht oath by heart: ‘I swear to the leader of the German people, Adolf Hitler, to be a brave soldier and to be loyal.’

To complete his legend, Drozdov travelled to Peru. Lima was home to many former Nazis, some of whom had been helped with their escapes from Europe by British and American intelligence and later worked as advisers for right-wing South American regimes. Drozdov visited a hotel known as a gathering place for the city’s German community. He found memoirs of Wehrmacht officers for sale at the reception desk, and he could hear the strains of German folk songs wafting from the restaurant.[10] Drozdov did not play the role of Hohenstein in Peru; he would have been sniffed out easily by the men at the hotel. But by spending time with them and hearing their stories, he built a richer backstory for the Überlebensträger and its supposed network in South America.

At KGB headquarters, there was some muttering about whether Drozdov could cope with the role linguistically, but he was adamant he could pull it off. He was perhaps attracted by the remarkable symmetry the mission offered. In 1944, he had graduated from an artillery college just in time to catch the last six months of fighting in the Great Patriotic War. He was put in charge of an artillery platoon prior to the liberation of Warsaw, and eventually made it all the way to Berlin. He had played his own small part in defeating Hitler’s Reich; now, a quarter of a century

later, he was to transform himself into the leader of a secret group that wanted to restore it.

Hans told Heidrun that his father planned to fly in from South America especially to see her. For security reasons, he explained, it was better for his father to stay on neutral territory, and so one misty morning he drove her to a deserted hamlet in the Austrian Alps, where the man was waiting. Heidrun found the baron to be an imposing presence – tall and thin, with a haughty, aristocratic bearing – but he greeted her warmly. He told her that patriotic forces might one day regain power in Germany, but for now his organisation needed all the help it could get to keep abreast of affairs in the homeland. Hohenstein explained to Heidrun that she could play an important part in helping them. He was delighted she was marrying Hans, he said, and entreated her to do everything she could to help the organisation. His German sounded a little strange, but that was not all that surprising for a man who had spent two decades in hiding in South America. After a short conversation, he bade her farewell and drove off along the mountain roads.

The meeting convinced Drozdov that Heidrun was a legitimate source. When he got back to Moscow, he reported his assessment to Andropov. The KGB chairman joked that a film should be made about Drozdov's performance as the Baron von Hohenstein, perhaps setting in motion an idea that led to the *Seventeen Moments* television series. During the next months, Heidrun continued to hand over as much information as she could lay her hands on, unaware that there was no organisation called the Überlebensträger and the Baron von Hohenstein worked not from a secret hideout in Peru but from a large office off a carpeted corridor in Lubyanka. In 1973, she was transferred back to BND headquarters, where she worked for the department responsible for coordinating joint NATO military projects. Hans told her it was too risky for him to enter West Germany, so she met him for weekends in Salzburg, Innsbruck or Geneva. Among the information Heidrun provided was a list of all the Soviet diplomats the West German government believed to be spies and documents outlining the plans of NATO's intelligence services for actions in the event of a full-blown conflict with the Soviet Union. Eventually, she became so frustrated with the fleeting nature of her contact with Hans, and the fact that their

engagement had still not culminated in a wedding, that she tried to break off the relationship. Her apologetic lover smoothed things over and persuaded her to hand materials over to another illegal, whom he described as a courier working for the Überlebensträger. Heidrun continued to hand over documents to the KGB until late 1976, when an investigation prompted by colleagues suspicious of her lavish lifestyle led to her arrest.[11]

Much later, Drozdov claimed that his meeting with Heidrun Hofer was just a small part of the Baron von Hohenstein's work, a dress rehearsal for the most important source recruited by the Überlebensträger. This was an officer to whom the KGB gave the code name D-104, who worked in what Drozdov called 'the most sensitive part of the BND'. D-104, the son of a high-ranking Wehrmacht officer, met the Baron von Hohenstein multiple times and handed over vitally important information over a five-year period, until Hofer was arrested and the operation had to be wound up.

In the early 1990s, the retired Drozdov spoke publicly about D-104. The BND launched a retroactive mole hunt, and suspicion fell on Volker Foertsch, a leading BND officer who fit Drozdov's description. If Foertsch was D-104, it was a stunning success for the KGB and for Drozdov's phoney baron. Foertsch vehemently denied the allegation, and after a brief investigation the hunt was dropped. Drozdov later issued a verbose semi-denial that Foertsch was D-104, adding mischievously that D-104 would only now, with the breaking scandal, have realised that all those years ago he had been working for the Soviets, not the Überlebensträger. The truth about D-104 may never be known. Perhaps he was Foertsch, perhaps he was another officer, and perhaps he was a figment of Drozdov's imagination, a postretirement game intended to set off a frenzy among his old enemies.[12]

There was less ambiguity about Heidrun Hofer's fate. Stunned when she learned she had fallen for a Romeo trap, she jumped from the window of her sixth-floor interrogation room during a break in questioning. Her fall was broken by bushes, but she spent several months in hospital. Eventually, the case against her was dropped. For decades afterwards, she treasured the few photographs she had of her fiancé

‘Hans’ and the engagement ring he had given her. She never found out his real name.[13]

When Andropov was informed about Heidrun’s suicide attempt, he chuckled that finally the KGB had its proof that she was not a double agent. Years later, Drozdov noted with a smile that Heidrun’s horror at finding out she had been fooled suggested he must have played his role rather well. This lack of compassion was characteristic of the KGB, where little attention was paid to the human cost of illegal operations. But it is easier to understand in this instance than in many others. Alfred Dürrwanger, Heidrun’s boss at the BND in Paris, had been decorated with the Knight’s Cross in 1942 for seizing a lighthouse on the Kerch peninsula in Crimea. His award citation proudly noted that the assault ended with 2,100 Red Army soldiers killed and 8,100 taken prisoner.[14] For Drozdov, there was little doubt that getting the better of such enemies was worth any amount of collateral damage.

18

The Main Enemy:

Spying on the Americans

The flashpoint of 1962, when the Cuban missile crisis pushed the world to the brink of nuclear war, receded into the past, and the logic of mutually assured destruction, whereby each side's vulnerability to attack prevented either from launching a first strike, led to a peculiar form of Cold War stability. This culminated in Richard Nixon's visit to Moscow in 1972, the first ever made by a US president. Nixon and Brezhnev signed seven agreements, including one on arms control and another on the prevention of accidental military clashes. The next year Brezhnev travelled to the United States for a return visit, a symbolic move cementing the beginning of so-called détente.

Even in this calmer period, there was little doubt in either Moscow or Washington that the general contours of the Cold War were permanent. For the KGB, the Main Enemy remained the Main Enemy, and the battle between the two superpowers had become global, with a fight for influence between the two systems raging across much of the world. Moscow also wanted to steal scientific and technological secrets from America; the brief period of economic promise during the Khrushchev years had faded, and the Soviet economy lagged far behind its capitalist rivals.

Spying was a key part of this Cold War stand-off. In the shadows, the KGB and the CIA worked to recruit double agents from the other side, and both had successes. But carrying out real, human intelligence work inside the opponent's country was almost impossible for both sides. In the United States, the paranoia of the McCarthy-era hunt for Communist influence had subsided, but the FBI still devoted vast resources to thwarting Soviet operations on American soil. In 1966, the KGB leadership reported wearily that the FBI was subjecting legal officers, stationed under diplomatic cover, to such intense surveillance that

carrying out any kind of espionage in the United States was almost impossible. In Moscow, pervasive KGB surveillance sent many CIA operatives stir crazy. They thought up ever more elaborate schemes to shake off their watchers, such as leaving the embassy in a van with two officers sitting in the front, one officer jumping out as the van turned a corner, and then a pop-up mannequin appearing in his place. Even with these innovative tactics, the Moscow environment was usually too risky for meetings with sources or making recruitment pitches.

One consequence of it being difficult for both Moscow and Washington to spy inside the other society was that the espionage battle moved to third countries. The KGB sent special squads of legal officers to places where Soviet diplomats were not subjected to the same intense surveillance as in the United States or Western Europe, to work on US diplomats and other American citizens living abroad. In the 1970s, these officers were dispatched to Mexico City, Vienna, Delhi, Tokyo, Singapore, Beirut, Kabul, Addis Ababa and Monrovia, with the sole purpose of recruiting Americans. In Scandinavian embassies alone, there were fifteen KGB officers working full-time on Americans.[1] A KGB guide set out some basic elements of the American psyche for the officers who would be making approaches. ‘Americans have strong chauvinist tendencies, are self-confident and dismissive of other nations, they believe in the superiority of the American way of life and are proud of American “democracy”,’ it noted. The KGB was also unimpressed with the ‘low cultural level’ of average Americans, noting that they got most of their intellectual intake from the cinema and television. ‘They will speak about loving Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky and Chekhov, but few of them have actually read these authors.’[2] Americans, the report concluded, had a free attitude to sex and ‘measure success only in money’. The CIA also produced guidelines for its officers on how to reel in potential Soviet sources, and beefed up its stations in third countries, where keeping an eye on the Soviet embassy and the KGB legal residency was one of the fundamental tasks. Most of the delicate recruitment dances performed by spies from both sides took place during cocktail parties, badminton games and morning walks in neutral countries across the globe, not in Moscow or Washington, DC.

The consequences of having few boots on the ground in the other superpower were sometimes felt acutely. For the CIA, one such moment

came in the run-up to the Cuban missile crisis, when Oleg Penkovsky, a senior officer in Soviet military intelligence, became worried by Khrushchev's unpredictability and wanted to warn the West that the prospect of nuclear war was real. In desperation, he approached two American students on the street in Moscow and asked them to take a message to their embassy. But the CIA knew how intensely its officers in Moscow were watched and feared it would be impossible to meet with Penkovsky without attracting attention. Instead, they asked MI6 for help, which recruited Greville Wynne, a British businessman who did work behind the Iron Curtain, as a go-between. Penkovsky's intelligence was eventually credited with informing American decision-making during the Cuban missile crisis, and perhaps even helping to avoid nuclear war, but it was not long before he was uncovered. Penkovsky and Wynne were both arrested in 1962; the Russian was executed, and Wynne was jailed.[3]

To make secure contact with future Penkovskys, the CIA would have needed its own equivalent of illegals inside the Soviet Union, people who could move around Moscow without the attention of the KGB's fearsome counterintelligence watchers. But the CIA's attempts to drop Russian émigrés into the Soviet Union in the early 1950s had failed, and there are no signs that the agency ever tried again to create Soviet-identity illegals. It was an almost impossible task to train operatives in the intricacies of Soviet life, then equip them with a legend and documentation strong enough to stand up to scrutiny in the bureaucracy-obsessed Soviet Union.

Still, the CIA was well aware of the limitations of using only 'legal' officers, posted under diplomatic cover to embassies, and it did adopt a system of deep-cover operatives that drew on some of the tenets of Soviet illegal work. These CIA illegals were known as non-official cover operatives (NOCs, pronounced 'knocks'). Directorate S had to rebadge its illegals as foreigners, because Soviet citizens were not allowed to travel freely, and so any Soviet citizen abroad was immediately suspected of links with the KGB. But there was little inherently suspicious about Americans who lived abroad, meaning the CIA could give NOCs cover jobs in the foreign offices of US firms, often with the approval of the senior management at home. This made the whole process of conjuring up new identities much easier than the convoluted system Directorate S used to find live or dead doubles.

Nevertheless, the CIA got a taste of just how difficult it was to train operatives for long-term clandestine missions. In one case, a young man was permitted to spend four years building his cover in a target country, attending university there and establishing himself as a salesman, but by the time he was ready to be activated, he had lost interest in working for the CIA. In other cases, an internal report into NOCs found, the cover identity was simply not convincing enough: 'There have been too many salesmen who did not sell, students who did not study, consultants who were not consulted, some of them living on a generous scale with large families, deluding themselves that all was well until perhaps the chief of station was queried by his cover boss, "Is so-and-so one of yours? He looks as phony to me as anyone I've ever seen!"'[4]

The benefits of using NOCs far outweighed these difficulties, and the programme grew over the years, with some NOCs having long corporate careers without raising suspicions. But the programme did not answer the question of how the CIA could gather human intelligence inside the Soviet Union. Placing a NOC in Moscow was virtually impossible: the few Westerners who lived there were viewed with extreme suspicion and were usually under KGB surveillance. For NOC work inside the Soviet bloc, the CIA would have needed illegals trained to pose as Soviet citizens, and after those failed early attempts it was in no mood to try again.

The KGB, however, remained steadfast in its belief that illegals should remain a key part of its espionage effort against the Main Enemy. Not subject to FBI monitoring, and able to travel around the United States relatively freely, illegals were the obvious solution to the Cold War counterintelligence environment, the KGB felt. They also had much more flexibility than legal officers with how they carried out a recruitment pitch to potential sources. By the late 1960s, few people in the West were willing to risk everything to spy for the Soviet Union out of ideological conviction. One workaround for this was to use financial incentives or blackmail, but another was to use a false flag, tricking recruits into believing they were spying for another country or organisation altogether. Americans with immigrant backgrounds often had warm feelings toward their country of origin, the KGB noted, so Polish, Greek or Italian Americans could be approached using the flag of the intelligence service

of their origin country. There was also the age-old trick of masking geopolitical espionage as corporate nosing. Whichever option was chosen, illegals would be in a better position to make a disguised approach than legal officers under diplomatic cover, who would struggle to conceal their Soviet affiliation.

In practice, however, it was getting ever harder to create legends and documents for new illegals, as well as to keep them productive and sane once they arrived in the West. Many illegals originally earmarked for deployment to the United States, like Yuri Linov, were eventually moved to other parts of the world as the work required to infiltrate them became too complicated. At least four illegals did manage to enter North America in the 1960s, all of them using a route via East and West Germany. But once they arrived, the counterintelligence capabilities of the FBI, plus the psychological pressure of illegal life, led to most of their missions being aborted.

In February 1965, Gennady Blyabin and his wife arrived in the United States after three years in Canada, posing as the Fischers, a West German couple. Peter Fischer worked as a freelance newspaper correspondent, an excellent pretext for meeting people and snooping around. The Centre tasked him with photographing military installations, but the couple were recalled in the summer of 1968 amid fears they had been discovered by the FBI. In a sign that the stress of illegal life was weighing on them, both Blyabin and his wife later underwent hospital treatment for alcoholism.[5]

In 1967, another illegal arrived in the United States with a similar background. Anatoly Rudenko trained as a piano tuner in East Germany, where he adopted the identity of Heinz Walter Feder. He crossed to the West in April 1961 and got a job in Hamburg with the piano manufacturer Steinway. From there, he moved to London and in 1967 settled in New York, finding work at the Manhattan showroom of Steinway & Sons on West Fifty-Seventh Street. He rented a small apartment in Astoria, Queens, and tuned pianos everywhere from nightclubs to the homes of well-known concert pianists. The work gained him access to exclusive residences, including the vast Westchester estate of Nelson Rockefeller, the governor of New York and future US vice president. He wrote profiles of Rockefeller’s personal chef and the family nanny, with whom he had become friendly.

The Centre was deeply impressed with Rudenko's access, even if it was not clear how it could be converted into intelligence gains. But during a visit to Moscow, Rudenko admitted he had been lying to the Centre for years. Back in Hamburg in 1961, he had fallen in love with a hairdresser and asked for permission to bring her into his work. The Centre had ordered him to break off relations immediately, but now it transpired that in fact he had married her and brought her to New York, without informing the Centre. Even more problematically, he had told her about his espionage work and decoded radio transmissions in front of her. On top of all this, Rudenko admitted that married life had taken a turn for the worse, and he had begun a passionate affair with an accountant in Pennsylvania. Rudenko's furious handlers ordered him to write two farewell letters, one to his wife saying he had fled because she was unbearable to live with, and one to his lover, announcing he was leaving the United States to escape his wife. The KGB mailed the letters from Vienna with no return address. Rudenko was removed from active service and lived out his days in disgrace, in an apartment on Prospekt Mira in the north of Moscow.[6]

The decade's most successful illegal infiltration of the Main Enemy was by two illegals posing as Gerhard Köhler and Erna Decker, a West German couple. Köhler had a real wife in Moscow, but she had been considered incapable of illegal work, so the KGB found him an East German woman who they believed would be a more appropriate espionage partner. The couple settled in Munich and in 1961 received West German passports. Köhler found work as a radio engineer and began applying for jobs in the United States. In 1963, he received an offer, and the couple moved to New Jersey. He sent back information on scientific and technological advances, and in 1970 the couple became naturalised Americans in a ceremony at Newark Courthouse. To prove his patriotism, Köhler even joined a volunteer network of people willing to help the FBI. But the strain of the situation began to take its toll as the pair found their sham of a marriage ever more difficult to cope with. In 1971, they decided to force the Centre's hand, travelling to Haiti to obtain a divorce. They continued to live in one apartment, and pretended to be a happy couple to their friends, but Decker wrote to the Centre demanding to be assigned a new partner. In the end, Köhler was withdrawn to Moscow in 1972 and reunited with his real, Russian family.

He died three years later. The Centre never found another suitable partner for Decker, and before long she was withdrawn from service.[7]

Despite the recurring difficulties with illegals in the field and the increasing amounts of time, expense and difficulty it took to ‘hatch’ new operatives, the Centre remained undeterred. All the hassle was worth the effort, the KGB believed, given the extreme difficulty of legal work. In 1969, the leadership approved a plan that by 1975 there should be ten new ‘illegal residencies’ in the United States, as well as two each in Mexico and Canada. It also wanted to set up five ‘strategic communications residencies’ across the Americas that would direct this network of illegals in the event of war with the United States.

These plans turned out to be hopelessly ambitious. By the time 1975 came around, there was just a single illegal operating in the whole country, the Czech-born Dalibor Valoušek. He and his wife had somehow managed to cope with the emotional somersaults required of them, and had laid a solid foundation from which to carry out espionage work. Valoušek also had an audacious pitch to make to his handlers. If it worked, it could solve two of the biggest problems illegals had faced since the start of the Cold War: how to integrate properly into American life, and how to keep their families together.

19

The Inheritor:

The Attempt to Create a Second-Generation Illegal

Dalibor Valoušek was born in a small village in Moravia in 1929. He studied at Prague's Charles University and was recruited by the KGB in 1955. The KGB earmarked him for a German-speaking identity and sent him to Halle in East Germany for language training. There, he began a romance with his German teacher, Inge, and after evaluation by Directorate S it was agreed the pair could be dispatched abroad as an illegal couple. The KGB gave Dalibor the identity of a Wehrmacht soldier, Rudolf Herrmann, who had perished in the Soviet Union in 1943. In late 1957, 'Rudi', Inge, and their newborn son, Peter, crossed into West Germany, where they posed as anti-Communists determined to embark on a new life in the West. Rudi's interview with the West German security services went so well that they tried to recruit him to be sent back to the East as a spy, so impressed were they with his anti-Communist zeal. He politely declined the offer.

With West German passports in hand, in February 1962 the family left for Canada. They settled in a suburb of Toronto and began to search for work opportunities. Rudi found a German deli for sale on Yonge Street, close to the headquarters of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), and took out a bank loan to buy it. Inge got busy in the kitchen, cooking up large batches of potato salad and baking loaves of German-style dark bread. The place soon became a hit with Toronto's German immigrant community, particularly those with right-wing views, who were regaled with tales of Rudi's supposed wartime heroics. Sometimes there were after-hours gatherings for regulars, and the men sang Nazi war songs. But there were also visitors from CBC headquarters, whom Rudi took care to befriend. He was an entertaining storyteller and made friends easily.

The Herrmanns enrolled Peter in a local kindergarten, and in 1963, Inge gave birth to a second son, Michael. Before long the couple decided to sell the delicatessen so Inge could focus on bringing up the children and Rudi on benefiting from the contacts he had made. Through a CBC employee he had met at the deli, Rudi got a job at the national broadcaster as a sound technician, drawing on skills he had picked up in Germany. At the same time, he studied filmmaking, and he was soon hired to help produce a campaign film for Canada's Liberal Party. The Herrmanns had become a model Canadian family, and in February 1967 they became naturalised citizens, taking the Oath of Allegiance to the Queen in a Toronto courthouse. Rudi felt he had built a good platform from which to make genuine political contacts, but ten days later a radio message came with new orders: MAKE ALL NECESSARY PREPARATIONS TO OBTAIN US VISA AND TO MOVE TO THE UNITED STATES.[1]

The family received US visas early in 1968. Rudi and Peter flew to New York to look for a house. What the eleven-year-old boy did not know, as his father dismissed house after house as unsuitable, was that Rudi was purchasing with very specific criteria in mind: the house had to be secluded and not observable from neighbouring properties, free from obstructions to the east, from where radio messages would come, and situated on high ground, a good distance from power lines. Eventually, he found the perfect place, among a warren of hilly streets in Hartsdale, an hour's train ride north of New York. The small split-level house, painted brown, was surrounded by tall trees on all sides except to the east and set back from the road up a steep driveway, out of sight of curtain-twitching neighbours. It was smaller than many of the grand chalets in the neighbourhood but nevertheless had plenty of space for a family of four. Rudi bought it for $32,000, taking out a $20,000 mortgage.

In May, a month before the family made the move, Rudi flew to Paris for briefings with a Line N officer. The man told Rudi his tasks in the United States would be to look out for progressives and to try to penetrate the Hudson Institute, which the KGB believed was a front for the US government. Rudi pointed out what seemed like an obvious flaw in the plan: he had an excellent degree from Charles University in Prague, but under a different identity. Now he was a freelance

cameraman with no educational qualifications and little excuse to infiltrate a think tank. The handler shrugged. Rudi should do his best.

Rudi cultivated friendships with employees at IBM, whose headquarters at Armonk was not far from his new home in Hartsdale. The company commissioned him to make training and sales films, as well as shorts that were meant for screening at conventions. The assignments became increasingly more elaborate. Once, Rudi went to Alaska to make a film that likened IBM salesmen to intrepid explorers pushing at the frontiers of the natural world. Another commission was for a film that compared leaders in sport and business. Rudi went to film the Phoenix 150 race and took Peter along for the ride. He proved adept at making films shot through with imagery extolling the virtues of capitalism.

The Centre started giving Rudi espionage tasks that were deemed too risky for legal KGB officers who might attract surveillance, as part of an overall plan to make illegals in the field more proactive.[2] Often, Rudi had to travel to various locations across the country and select convenient dead drop sites. These were often close to military facilities and other restricted complexes, and he suspected the drops were to service agents the KGB was running on the inside. Other tasks made less sense. In March 1969, the Centre ordered him to mail an anonymous letter to NASA, warning them that the next manned spaceflight would be sabotaged. Rudi bought a typewriter from a pawnshop and typed up a letter supposedly from a patriotic citizen. He had overheard passengers on a plane talking about a terrorist attack on the spaceflight, he wrote, and wanted to warn authorities. He demolished the machine with a saw, discarded it piece by piece, and drove to Charlotte, North Carolina. From there, he caught a bus to Atlanta and posted the letter, before making an equally convoluted trip back home. The caper was as pointless as it was elaborate: the launch went off as planned.

Following the KGB’s decision to make illegals play more active roles, Rudi was also given the task of handling agents, something that few long-term illegals had done since the early 1950s. He became the contact for Hugh Hambleton, an economics professor at Laval University in Quebec, who had been recruited two decades previously. Hambleton had been drawn in mainly by appeals to the importance of the geopolitical role he could help play in the shadows, and he became one of the KGB’s most valued agents. During the several years when he worked for NATO

in Paris in the 1950s, he handed over hundreds of secret documents to the KGB. He left NATO in 1961 to pursue a doctorate at the London School of Economics and then took a job teaching at Laval. Rudi introduced himself as a filmmaker named Douglas. He was looking for a consultant who knew Quebec well for a new film project, he said. When he got Hambleton alone later, he confessed that the pair had ‘common friends’ and reactivated him with requests for economic data and information wanted by the KGB.[3]

Rudi’s film work was proving profitable. He equipped his basement with cutting-edge darkroom equipment, and IBM colleagues who worked with him on the films came to the Hartsdale house to edit footage. The accoutrements of Rudi’s life as a spy were kept safely locked away in a desk upstairs. Once a week, he took out his radio and decoded a message from Moscow. With infuriating frequency, the Centre enquired after his progress infiltrating the Hudson Institute. How was a filmmaker with no degree living in New York meant to penetrate a think tank in Washington, DC? And why, if they were so keen on his doing so, did they not permit him to attend university and undergo a career change?

One evening, in April 1972, Rudi received a message that ordered him to attend an in-person meeting in Quito, Ecuador. It was a rare chance for a face-to-face discussion, and Rudi decided he would use it to express his frustration at the Centre’s bumbling instructions. As usual, he needed a way to make his travels look like an innocent trip related to his cover job, so he found a client who needed stock footage of the Andes. Peter was now fourteen years old and studying Spanish at school, so Rudi brought him along to help translate. The pair set off for a two-week voyage through South America that would take them to Peru, Brazil and finally Ecuador. Rudi would be able to show Peter a new part of the world, shoot footage that would earn him some money, and have the meeting where he could finally offload his irritations.

Peter was struggling to make friends at school. He was academically gifted and unfailingly polite, but all was not well in his head. Rudi could be so charming with his colleagues and his friends, but with his son he was something of a tyrant: never violent, but always psychologically domineering. He was dismissive of American culture and insisted that

Peter not waste his time on mind-rotting pursuits such as reading comics or listening to rock-and-roll music.

The endless upheavals in Peter's life did not help. First, the family had moved to Canada from Germany when he was four. Then, when he started feeling at home in Toronto, he was pulled out of his genteel school and transferred to New York, where his new classmates roughed him up for lunch money. He was sad that all his friends seemed to have grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins, while his parents had no living relatives whatsoever, and the six-year age gap with his younger brother made it difficult for them to form a meaningful connection. Growing up in the Herrmann family did come with a few perks: by the time Peter became a teenager, he had already travelled more than most of his peers. The family took frequent summer holidays in Europe, and Peter had made several road trips across America to accompany his dad on filming assignments. Now here they were on an exciting adventure to South America. At home, his father gave orders; on the road, it felt to Peter that they were more like partners. They stayed in simple hotels and took long walks through the cities to explore. As they travelled around South America, an idea was developing in Rudi's head.

After filming scenes of everyday life in Guayaquil, Ecuador, father and son headed for Quito, where they checked into a hotel in the city centre. Shortly before 6 p.m., Rudi told Peter he was going for a stroll and slipped out to a meeting place outside a theatre that had been specified in his radio transmission back in New York. Soon after he arrived, a tall, thin man with a long face approached.

'Good evening. Have you read any books by Elie Wiesel lately?' asked the man.

'No, I have been reading Hemingway,' Rudi replied.[4]

Code phrases exchanged, the man shook Rudi's hand and introduced himself as Yuri. As usual, he offered no more detail, so Rudi had no idea that he was meeting with the deputy head of the whole of Directorate S. Drozdov, who was possibly in South America to research the 'Nazi baron' he would soon play, had been given the side task of smoothing things over with the Centre's top illegal in the United States.

'I came only to convey our appreciation of your service and to let you know that we are always interested in your welfare,' said Drozdov.

Rudi took a liking to his new contact, and his anger at the Centre dissipated. Drozdov told Rudi to meet him the next morning at ten at the Ciudad Mitad del Mundo, just outside the city, where there was a monument marking the exact location of the equator. Rudi asked if he could bring Peter along, and Drozdov said he would be delighted to meet the boy.

The next morning, Drozdov and Rudi chatted in German while Peter examined the monument. The three of them ate lunch at a restaurant nearby. Peter did not notice anything strange about this meeting; Rudi often got chatting with strangers when they travelled, particularly 'fellow Germans'. Drozdov ordered a large bowl of *aguado de gallina*, a thick and spicy local stew, spooning it onto Rudi's and Peter's plates. The young boy dipped his fork in and tried the tiniest bite and immediately started panting. His mouth was on fire. Drozdov, meanwhile, was happily shovelling down spoonfuls.

After lunch, Peter went to take a walk, and Rudi told Drozdov he wanted to reveal his identity to his son and include him in his work. Rudi was worried that Peter was growing up to be a capitalist American, and his legend meant he had to play the role of a reactionary right-wing German at home. He was concerned that if he waited too much longer to reveal his true allegiances, he could lose the boy forever. Drozdov had sized up Rudi's son carefully over lunch and was impressed.[5] Peter was much more at ease speaking with adults than with children his own age, and gave the impression of a thoughtful, erudite boy. For years illegals had struggled because they had no Western education records and would fail any background check for government work or other sensitive jobs. Drozdov was intrigued by the idea of a second-generation illegal, but he was also wary of causing a potential security breach if it was handled the wrong way. He told Rudi to wait a few years before making his move.

The issue of children was one of the thorniest and most painful for illegals. Vadim Kirpichenko, the head of Directorate S in the late 1970s, admitted that it was 'rarely possible to solve the family lives of illegals satisfactorily'.[6] Yet it was taken as a given that the human emotions around children should be a secondary concern. Operational requirements took precedence. Children who had learned even a few words of Russian were banned from foreign assignments, so illegal couples who gave birth before departing for a mission had to leave them with relatives or deposit

them in a KGB orphanage. One illegal couple returned to Moscow for a visit, with a one-year-old son born while they were abroad. They left the infant with his grandmother while they took a vacation at a Black Sea sanatorium. During that month, the child picked up a few phrases in Russian, which meant it would be too dangerous to return with him. They left him behind and, when they returned to their deployment country, announced to their friends that he had been killed in a tragic accident.[7]

Many illegals, like Rudi, had children who had grown up in the capitalist West, believing themselves to be ordinary Americans, Canadians or Germans. The question for the Centre was when, if ever, the parents should reveal the truth. To do so while abroad was an enormous operational risk. What if the children blurted something out to friends or teachers? Many illegals only revealed their identities to their children once they were already travelling back to the Soviet Union on their final recall, which tended to cause family crises.[8]

There was one more radical approach, which had almost never been tried.[9] This was to rear, over many years, a child who knew his or her parents worked for the KGB, and would be trained to carry on their work. Rudi thought about his frustrations over his inability to penetrate the Hudson Institute and imagined the success Peter could have in getting that job, or even one with the government, and rising through the ranks. Rudi thought creating a second-generation illegal would kill two birds with one stone: it would save his son from becoming an ordinary American capitalist and being ripped away from him in the process, and it would provide the KGB with a new and much more promising kind of operative.

In the spring of 1974, two years after the meeting with Drozdov in Ecuador, Rudi’s radio message ordered him to return to South America, this time to Chile. A few months before, General Augusto Pinochet had launched a coup to topple the left-wing presidency of Salvador Allende. Tanks and jets had opened fire on the presidential palace. Allende, after determining he did not have the support of the army, gave a final radio address to the nation, and then committed suicide. A crackdown followed in which many were killed and tens of thousands of leftists were arrested. The CIA denied involvement, but at the very least it welcomed the change and supported the junta in the aftermath. Within two weeks,

diplomatic relations between Chile and the Soviet Union were severed, and the diplomats and legal KGB officers stationed at the Soviet embassy in Santiago departed for Moscow. Several months later, the Centre was hungry for information from Pinochet's Chile. Rudi's job would be to spend time on the ground and send back a report on the general mood of the society, gauging whether the new regime was going to last.

As usual, Rudi came up with a good cover story for the trip: he had made a short educational film about childbirth for a contact who was a doctor in upstate New York. Now he ordered Spanish dubbing for the film and announced he was embarking on a tour of South America to present the movie at nursing institutions. Peter again took time off school to be Rudi's companion and translator. This time, Rudi had an ulterior motive.

The pair flew to Santiago, where the atmosphere was combustible. They stayed in a once-regal hotel in the centre of the capital; there were still bullet holes in the walls from the coup, and the curtains were torn. Armed guards patrolled outside. Peter noticed with trepidation that their machine guns were gripped in both hands, with fingers hovering close to the triggers. Jeeps carrying armed men sped regularly down the streets, and the presidential palace was still damaged and boarded up. Although many prominent leftist figures had fled the country in the aftermath of the coup, some stayed and tried to coordinate a resistance movement. Army sweeps of suspicious neighbourhoods were frequent, and a few months after Rudi and Peter's visit Pinochet's forces executed Miguel Enríquez, a leader of the Movement of the Revolutionary Left, having tracked him to a safe house in a Santiago suburb. One afternoon when Rudi and Peter returned to the hotel from a day walking around town, they saw into one of the rooms as it was being cleaned and glimpsed a full-length portrait of a man in Nazi uniform, presumably the room's resident. They wondered whether he had fled to Chile after the war or had recently arrived from elsewhere to counsel the new right-wing government. Either way, the sight of the portrait added to the sense of unease. During a train journey to Valparaiso, the coastal city where the coup had begun with a mutiny of naval units, armed men aggressively demanded their passports. It was only Rudi's calm demeanour that prevented them from being detained as suspicious aliens.

On their way back to New York, Rudi and Peter made stops in Bolivia and Peru, where Rudi was to write up his report. One afternoon, as they walked through Miraflores, an upmarket neighbourhood of Lima perched on bluffs above the ocean, Rudi decided it was time. He told Peter to sit with him on a bench. As they looked out across the Pacific, Rudi explained to his son that what he was about to tell him was important and could never be discussed in public, not among his friends and certainly not with his younger brother, Michael. Peter nodded.

'I have a story to tell you,' said Rudi, taking a deep breath. 'I am not who you think I am. I am not a German, and I'm not called Rudi, I am a Czech man named Dalibor Valoušek, and I work for the Soviet Union, for the KGB.'

Rudi told Peter about his family behind the Iron Curtain. He explained that Peter may have heard him speak like a Nazi but that he was actually the antithesis of a Nazi. He was a Communist, and he believed Marxism was the solution to the world's troubles. He explained that his mission was to ensure world peace. Peter showed little outward sign of emotion at these revelations. He quietly asked a few questions.

'Does Mother know?'

'She also is an agent of the KGB.'

As Rudi continued talking, two thoughts coursed through Peter's mind. For years, he had felt unable to relate to the world and the people in it. Part of that, he was sure, was because he had no family beyond his parents and brother. As he heard about grandparents, uncles, cousins, he wondered whether everything would now change. At the same time, there was a viscerally shocking element to his father's admission. The Russians! The KGB! The thoughts hit him like lightning bolts. Peter had, with the discreet curation of his father, witnessed enough inequality and unfairness in American life to know it wasn't the paradise that some made it out to be. He had read plenty about Watergate and Vietnam. At the same time, he was certain that the Russians were the bad guys. But then, his dad wasn't a bad guy, and his dad was working for the Russians. So perhaps they were not so bad after all? It was a lot to take in.

'Would you be willing to become an intelligence officer like me?' Rudi asked his son. Peter's head was spinning, and he didn't know what to think or say. So he did what he always did in these situations: he

bottled up his emotions and decided he would deal with them later. Calmly, he nodded his assent.

Rudi informed the Centre he had divulged his real identity to Peter and suggested a family trip to East Germany, Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union, for Peter to meet his relatives and future employers. He received detailed travel instructions for a trip in the summer of 1974, once school was finished for the year. Peter and Rudi took separate flights to Europe, having agreed to meet in Copenhagen a few days later. Inge flew with Peter's younger brother, Michael, to Spain. She dropped him off at a summer camp there and told him she was going to West Germany and would see him in a few weeks. Then she headed to Moscow.

In Copenhagen, Peter met with his father and spent a couple of days seeing the sights. Rudi took Peter's passport and disappeared with it; a few hours later he came back with new documents for the pair. Directorate S frequently used Copenhagen as a transit point for illegals, because there were no passport inspections inside the port. A few days after their arrival, Rudi woke Peter at dawn, and the pair sped to the port and crept aboard a small Soviet freighter. A brusque man showed them to a tiny cabin below deck, sparsely furnished with a bunk bed and small toilet. A grimy half-light emanated from a small porthole. A few times a day, there was a knock at the door, and a tray of food was left for them. The air inside the cabin was stale and so was the food. Peter had not brought any books with him and found the long hours in the tiny cabin hard. At Rudi's request, the man who brought their meals rustled up some English-language pamphlets on Marxism–Leninism, which Peter leafed through without understanding much. It was his first introduction to the ideology he was now expected to spend his life serving. The journey stretched out for three long days before Peter made out the docks of Leningrad through the cabin's filthy window. When they disembarked, they were met by a pair of low-level Directorate S functionaries, who took them on a tour of the city.

Peter was extremely well travelled for a sixteen-year-old, but he nevertheless felt as if he had stepped onto an alien planet. Everything here seemed different. There were no billboards, the streets were vast, and the signs were incomprehensible. In South America, Rudi and Peter

had explored on foot; here, they were whisked around by stern men in black Volga limousines. After a day in Leningrad, Rudi and Peter were driven to the railway station, where a private compartment in an overnight express train to Moscow awaited them. They arrived at the capital's Leningrad Station and took a drive to one of the Stalin-era skyscrapers on the river embankment. It looked like a building from a fantasy comic to Peter. A *konskvartira* in the vast wedding cake of a building was to be their home in Moscow. Inge was already there.

A housekeeper cooked meals for the family, and that first evening there was a dinner with several handlers from Directorate S. The table was set for eight with plates of local delicacies and three glasses per person, for tangy Borjomi mineral water, wine and vodka. Before they sat to eat, Inge murmured a warning to Rudi that the handlers were unhappy with his work in the United States. Rudi was furious with his wife for acting like a mouthpiece for the KGB. The dinner was marked by simmering tension both between the married couple and between Rudi and his handlers, but no disagreement was expressed. The handlers asked Peter questions about his life and his plans. He replied politely and with poise. The Russians seemed impressed.

The next morning, a Directorate S man named Andrei came to lambaste Rudi about his failures in the field. Andrei asked Rudi why his report had claimed there was no chance that progressive forces would emerge victorious in Chile, accusing him of shoddy analysis and an overly pessimistic viewpoint. Rudi was right in his assessment, but the Centre was often reluctant to accept the facts on the ground when they were politically inconvenient. Rudi told Andrei that he was an idiot who had no understanding of what was happening in Chile.

Andrei moved on to Rudi's failure to penetrate the Hudson Institute, accusing the illegal of being more interested in pursuing the American dream than in real intelligence work.

'You have done nothing. What exactly have you accomplished in the last fourteen months? Nothing; exactly nothing except live the *dolce vita*,' Andrei said mockingly.

Rudi lost it, screaming at the man that he was a 'dull, miserable, peasant' who had no idea how the United States functioned.

'You myopic asshole, you ask what I have done? I have delivered to you my son; that is one thing I've done. He can be a great intelligence

officer unless fools like you ruin him.’[10]

Peter, in the next room, could hear the shouting, but he couldn’t make out what anyone was saying. He sat quietly and waited for the noise to stop.

During their week-long stay in Moscow, the family was discouraged from venturing out alone; the smallest chance that a visiting tourist could recognise them was too much for the handlers to risk. Still, they made occasional outings: the KGB procured tickets for a folk dance performance, which everyone found tedious, and for the circus, which they enjoyed. Peter marvelled at the up-close view of the acts inside the concrete big top. On another day, Rudi slipped out of the apartment with Peter to show him the Moscow metro. The boy was astounded by the long escalators that seemed to descend into the bowels of the earth, to eventually reveal the palatial splendour of the platforms. After Moscow, the family flew to spend a couple of days each in Czechoslovakia and East Germany. Peter met the grandparents he never knew he had. Everyone seemed friendly and warm, but the whole experience was difficult for him to digest, and he dealt with it by mostly staying quiet.

When they returned to Moscow, the handlers took Peter out for a day to teach him the basics of evading surveillance. Another man came to the apartment to show him how to write using invisible ink. In his mind, Peter had imagined attractive, uniformed female agents instructing him, but his teachers were all men. An old and bumbling technical whiz gave Rudi a new ‘burst’ radio, which shortened the time it took to transcribe the Centre’s messages. The man reminded Peter of a character in *Get Smart*, the Mel Brooks satire on James Bond, one of his favourite television programmes.

Over another big dinner, a trainer explained to Peter some of the risks and challenges of his father’s work and asked if he was willing to be inducted into the illegals programme. He explained what important work Peter’s parents were doing and emphasised that their spying contributed to the preservation of global peace. It soon became clear, though, that the question was not so simple. If the handlers sensed that Peter was not truly willing to become a second-generation illegal, it would be too dangerous for him to be sent back to the United States. He already knew too much for that. Instead, he would have to remain in Moscow and wait out the

end of his parents' mission. Rudi and Inge would return to the United States and invent a tragic accident to explain the disappearance of their son.

'You either have to be okay with this, and agree to help with your parents' mission, or you have to stay here,' one of the men explained to Peter.

Peter did not want to be separated from his family, so he nodded that he was happy to begin training as an illegal. His tasks for now would be minimal: to return home, and start his studies at McGill University in Montreal. He was to keep an eye out for left-leaning students and use his newly acquired skills to prepare reports on them, which his father could then forward to Moscow. He should never espouse left-wing or pro-Soviet views publicly, nor should he socialise with Communists or Russians. Peter's training would begin in earnest the next summer, it was agreed, when he would be welcomed back to Moscow for a longer trip. At the end of the night, the men announced they had decided on the code name for Peter's KGB file. He would be known as Erbe, German for 'the inheritor'.

Rudi was bursting with pride at his son's induction. Peter said little, but inside he was in turmoil. When Rudi took him for a walk in the park and they saw a woman struggling with a pram, Rudi reprimanded him for not rushing to help. A real man always helps people out, Rudi told him. Peter's mind clouded with fury. *You bring me here, where everyone is alien and strange, and now you are attacking me,* he thought. He said nothing out loud.

A few weeks after the family returned home, Peter headed for college in Montreal. He had completed his last two years of high school in one, partly because he was clever enough to do so and partly because Rudi and Inge hoped a change in environment would ease the loneliness he had felt at school. But by the time he arrived at McGill, there was a lot weighing on Peter's mind. Would he be able to fulfil his father's outsized expectations? Would he be able to make friends or meet a girlfriend? Was he really going to work for the KGB for the rest of his life, and would he succeed in not breathing a word of his secret? It was a lot to think about for someone who was still only sixteen.

Previously, academic success had been the one source of pride and stability in Peter's life. Now, for the first time, he was not the cleverest student in his class. As always, he was outwardly calm. But something inside him was reaching a breaking point. He read Freud and other books on psychoanalysis; he studied literature on neurotic disorders. A few months after starting university, he drew a picture of himself, neck in a noose, dangling lifeless from a hangman's gallows. It had the caption 'Shit.' He mailed it to his parents without any accompanying note. They did not reply.

In May 1975, Peter returned home for the summer, and Rudi took him to New Jersey to demonstrate how to perform a dead drop operation. They spent several hours driving in loops, checking for surveillance, and then made their way to the village of Towaco, about twenty-five miles west of New York City. Rudi told Peter to toss a line of radiator hose at the base of a large oak tree, and then leave an empty Coca-Cola bottle by another tree, a little farther down the road, to indicate the drop had been made. They went to drink coffee and then drove past a third tree, where Rudi pointed out a piece of orange peel. It meant an agent had picked up the drop, he explained, and they could safely drive home.

Later that week, Rudi showed Peter how to use onetime pads to decode radio messages. He was pleased at how well his son was taking it all in. Neither Peter nor Rudi brought up the cartoon. Peter did not know how to talk about emotions with his father, and Rudi had already forgotten about it, dismissing it to Inge with raised eyebrows as a 'college phase'.

That summer, Peter made his first solo trip to the Soviet Union. Rudi took him for a walk to explain how the logistics would work; such things were best not discussed inside the house, where his younger brother might overhear. Rudi carefully described the location of a specific black lamppost on a section of the Danube embankment in central Vienna, where Peter was to leave a chalk mark to note his arrival. If he saw another chalk mark on a different lamppost the next day, he would know his signal was received and an in-person meeting was to take place the next day at a third location.

It all went as planned, and a few days after his arrival in Vienna, Peter met a man in a suit, presumably a Line N officer stationed in the city,

who took his passport and handed him false papers identifying him as a German tourist, along with a ticket for the hydrofoil to Budapest the next day. When the boat arrived, he was met at the dock and driven to a villa in the Buda hills.

'Wait here,' his driver told him, and left.

Peter spent two days in the pleasant villa, where he was both VIP and prisoner. He was waited on by a housekeeper and gorged on cherries from a tree in the garden, but rued the fact that he could not explore the city. On his third day, the driver returned and motioned for Peter to get back into the car. He was driven to an airfield and told to board a military transport plane waiting on the tarmac. The interior was cavernous, and there were only a couple of other passengers. Two hours after taking off, the plane started its descent and landed at what Peter realised was an air base somewhere outside Moscow. Another car materialised, which drove him back to the same apartment he had stayed in with his family the previous year. There, he was greeted by someone he recognised as one of his father's handlers and by a younger man who introduced himself as Viktor.

Over the next days, Viktor tutored Peter in elements of spycraft, but told him that most of his training would come on the job, from working with his father. The primary purpose of this visit was to show Peter some of the Soviet Union and inspire loyalty toward the socialist nation. Peter and Viktor first flew south to Volgograd, which had been renamed from Stalingrad in 1961 as part of Khrushchev's programme of de-Stalinisation. The main draw was a visit to *The Motherland Calls*, a statue of a warrior woman – mouth agape, hair swept back, and brandishing a sword – that towered over the city. It was the tallest monument in the world, Peter was told. Tree-lined paths led up to the base of a complex, a cavernous hall bearing names of the dead. The experience would remain etched into Peter's memory as the most sombre moment of his life.

From Volgograd, they flew to Bratsk in the heart of Siberia, a daylong trip on a packed plane that made several stops in cities along the way. In 1955, Soviet authorities had erected a huge dam and hydroelectric plant on the Angara River, and soon a city sprang up around the site, where previously there had been just a few sparsely populated villages. Subsequently, the authorities built a vast aluminium smelter and pulp mill

near the dam. Volgograd and Bratsk symbolised two key pillars of Soviet pride: the war victory of the past, and the strides forward in industrialisation that would bring about full Communism in the future. Peter was impressed by the scale, but it seemed like a long way to fly to look at a dam. Afterwards, there was a fishing expedition on Lake Baikal. He and Viktor cast out onto the vast expanse of the lake in a small boat with a couple of locals to guide them. Nobody caught anything. In the end, they spotted another fishing boat nearby and swapped a few bottles of vodka for some freshly caught fish. Viktor cooked up a stew on the boat, which they ate under the stars.

When Peter got home and described the trip to his parents, Rudi was furious at the handlers for not providing more explicit instruction in Marxism–Leninism. Perhaps the KGB felt perks and red-carpet treatment would be more effective incentives for a second-generation illegal, raised in the United States, than earnest exhortations to Soviet ideology. But Rudi muttered angrily that it was more evidence of the incompetence of his handlers, and he drafted an angry note to the Centre: ‘Your failure to provide Erbe with comprehensive ideological training and political indoctrination violates a clear and basic understanding. Neither Erbe nor anybody else can long work successfully within any secret service without total ideological commitment. Request Center advise how it proposes to rectify this grave omission.’[11]

The Centre ignored Rudi’s exhortation. Instead, he received new instructions: he was to select two drop sites in the vicinity of El Paso, Texas. Rudi looked at a map and noticed the area specified was near the White Sands missile testing ground. He assumed the KGB had an agent on the inside and needed to find a spot to leave money or instructions. Rudi travelled south and picked two places, one in an isolated part of the desert close to a pipeline and the other in a neglected corner of a local cemetery. He memorised the exact coordinates of both locations. He paused for a moment, wondering about the mole who would come to make the drop and what secrets he or she might stash there for the KGB.

Some months later, in early 1976, the Centre ordered Rudi to locate another set of drop sites, close to the atomic research centre at Oak Ridge, Tennessee. This time he took Peter along, to teach him the art of selecting suitable places. Peter soon got the hang of it, and Rudi was impressed when his son found a perfect spot at the back of a small

church. Still, he could see that his son did not share his ideological affinity for the work.

That summer, Peter was meant to travel to the Soviet Union again, and Rudi hoped this time he would finally receive the training he needed. Peter arrived in Vienna and met a man who introduced himself as Max at the appointed location. Max told him that the plans had fallen through: Peter would not be going to Moscow this year. The next day, over a drink, Peter told Max that he had applied to transfer from McGill to Georgetown, partly because he was not enjoying life in Canada and partly because the KGB had expressed a preference that he transfer to a US university, where he could make better contacts. Max was delighted at the news and told him he should look out for interesting students and write quarterly reports on them for the KGB: anyone with fathers in government, anyone who was strongly progressive, and anyone critical of US foreign policy. Max gave him an address in Mexico to memorise, the place where he was to post his reports.[12] Max bade Peter farewell, leaving him to fill his weeks lounging around Vienna, visiting operas and museums. Once again, Rudi was enraged when he found out what had happened.

Peter started at Georgetown in the autumn of 1976. Every now and then, he wrote a letter in invisible writing profiling various fellow students and sent it off to the address Max had given him. He took classes in Arabic, because the KGB felt the language might help him gain access to more interesting government jobs upon graduation.[13] The next spring, Rudi came to visit, and Peter finally found the resolve to tell his father that something was wrong. He explained that the stress of his double life had become too much, and he planned to take a year off from university before his final year. He wanted to spend it somewhere in Europe.

‘I need a break, and I need to clear my head,’ Peter told his father.

Rudi was not happy, but agreed they would talk about it when Peter came to New York for the summer. A few weeks later, Peter took the train north, and as he was coming up the escalator at Penn Station, he saw his father waiting for him at the top, flanked by two men in suits.

‘Peter, come with us,’ said Rudi. ‘These men need to talk to you.’

New York City was the centre of the struggle between the KGB and the FBI. The Soviet mission to the UN created far more diplomatic slots for KGB officers to fill than the embassy in Washington, DC, and the New York resident was the most powerful KGB officer in the country. Since 1975, the resident had been Yuri Drozdov, returning to desk work after his turn as the Baron von Hohenstein. Usually, the legal resident would not know any details about illegals in country, but Drozdov was an unusual resident; he had met Rudi and Peter back in Quito and had certainly read their files while he was deputy head of Directorate S. But once in New York, he had no interaction with them; it was too risky for legals and illegals to cross paths.

Drozdov's diplomatic cover job was deputy head of the Soviet delegation to the UN, and he had use of a two-room apartment inside the mission. Most other Soviet diplomats – and the spies pretending to be diplomats – lived in a twenty-storey compound in Riverdale, in the Bronx, built in haste in 1974. The complex had hundreds of apartments, a bar, Russian shops, a clinic, a school and a play area for children, to ensure minimal mingling with Americans.[14] The idea was to keep all the Soviets in one place and thus make them less susceptible to approaches from the FBI.

Drozdov's adversaries in New York City were based just a few blocks away from the Soviet mission, in the FBI's field office on East Sixty-Ninth Street. Countering the Soviet threat was the office's top priority, and there were hundreds of agents working the Soviet beat in New York. They were divided into squads focusing on different areas of KGB activity. The illegals squad worked in a ninth-floor suite of offices thick with cigarette smoke. Around half the all-male squad had served in Vietnam, and most were devoted to their work with deep conviction. The squad chief was Joe Hengemuhle, a burly disciplinarian and workaholic. A devout Catholic with seven children, he was rarely seen without a cup of coffee in one hand and a cigarette in the other. He declined small talk, never socialised with subordinates, and was 'as serious as a heart attack', one of his squad recalled. He later suffered one, passing away in his late fifties, after he transferred to Washington to head up the entirety of the FBI's Soviet operations.

The illegals squad was charged with keeping tabs on the Line N officers in the embassy. These operatives filled and retrieved dead drops

with instructions or important packages from the Centre for illegals, but they did not, as a rule, know their cover names or exact addresses. The Line N men were the most secretive of all the KGB officers in the mission. ‘They could be out at eight in the morning on a Sunday shaking off surveillance for six hours, and then at the end of it all, go shopping with their wife, just to mess with you,’ recalled one former squad member. The FBI men hoped that if they followed the Line N operatives diligently enough, they might eventually catch the scent of an actual illegal, but this was a long shot. They described their work as ‘hunting for unicorns’.

So when news came, sometime around 1975, that a successful ‘dangle’ operation might have put the FBI onto the trail of an illegal, a wave of excitement swept through the office. Dangles were fake defectors, used extensively by both sides in the Cold War to feed false information to the adversary. The FBI selected its dangles carefully, analysing records of real turncoats and realising they tended to be low-ranking, disgruntled men with an axe to grind. They also noticed that the KGB sometimes proactively approached émigrés or second-generation immigrants from the Eastern bloc, especially those who still had family behind the Iron Curtain. The FBI searched for someone who fit the bill and found Ralph Sigler, an army radio technician who had emigrated from Czechoslovakia as a child and could still speak Czech, German and some Russian. After coaching by the FBI, Sigler walked into the Soviet embassy in Mexico City in 1966. Expressing frustration with his army career, he offered to spy for the Soviets. The KGB took the bait, and over the next decade they paid Sigler handsomely for a stream of information that was actually a curated mix of fairly unimportant intelligence and FBI misinformation.

In 1975, the army transferred Sigler to the White Sands missile range, and his KGB handlers told him to communicate with them using two dead drops in the vicinity. These, apparently, were the drops that Rudi had selected, putting the FBI onto him in the process. The dangle had led to a real, live unicorn, although some sources claim the whole story was invented to throw the Soviets off the real reason the FBI found Rudi. Either way, the Americans had found a Soviet illegal for the first time since Abel two decades previously.[15]

More than half the squad moved to tracking Rudi around the clock. Because he had chosen his home carefully, it was not possible to keep watch without drawing attention, so the FBI installed cameras around his driveway and along the surrounding streets, under the guise of repairmen fixing the streetlamps. Surveillance cars were kept parked several blocks away, ready to tail Rudi every time he left the house. The FBI also bugged the phone in the Herrmann house. They watched as Peter headed off to the Soviet Union for training, and kept watching for two whole years. Training an illegal was an expensive business; so was tracking one. Finally, the FBI felt they had enough evidence to make a move.

Hengemuhle approached Rudi disguised as a client who wanted to commission some film work, and he suggested they meet to discuss the details. He invited Rudi to what he claimed was his home, in fact a mansion belonging to a friend of one of his deputies. There, Hengemuhle revealed he was with the FBI and gave Rudi a choice: either swift arrest or immunity and eventual resettlement with a new identity, in exchange for agreeing to work as a double agent. Rudi was a devoted Communist, but for years he had been frustrated with the unrealistic demands and lack of gratitude from his handlers. For him, cooperating with the FBI offered a way to put one over the men in Moscow, who he thought had failed to utilise his talents properly. He made a decision quickly, saying he was ready to work with the FBI as long as he was not expected to give up his Marxist beliefs or ‘kill for America’. He went home and broke the news to Inge, who was disgusted he had agreed to the FBI’s terms and fell into depression. Sheila Horan, one of the FBI’s first female special agents, was brought in to keep an eye on Inge, who appeared to be flirting with suicide. When Peter returned to New York, planning to take his year off, the FBI accompanied Rudi and met him at Penn Station. They debriefed the boy too, already fully aware of his trips to Moscow.

The FBI told Rudi to keep his normal communication schedule with the KGB so that Moscow would not suspect anything was wrong. Rudi, always looking for ways to outsmart his handlers, subtly inserted deliberate errors into his communications to warn the Centre that all was not well, but nobody in Moscow picked up on them. Peter, meanwhile, was left to his own devices at Georgetown, though two handlers, one from the FBI and one from the CIA, met with him once a month to check in. The meetings were low-key and sometimes even enjoyable; they took

Peter to restaurants, a theme park, and on a couple of occasions even a strip joint. When he graduated, they found him a job at a small lobbying firm in DC. Rudi, in his communications with the Centre, invented ever more reasons why Peter could not yet return to the Soviet Union for further training.

In 1979, the FBI decided the game had gone on long enough. They told Rudi he should prepare to break off all contact with Moscow. Peter would have to be ready to disappear, too. He had been dating a woman in DC for the past eighteen months, but had not yet told her anything about his strange family background. Unwilling to start now, he deliberately escalated one of their arguments to the point that the relationship disintegrated in acrimony.

When Rudi broke off communications with the Centre, the FBI moved the family to a safe house in Annapolis. Hengemuhle calculated that publicly parading the illegal would cause maximum annoyance to the KGB, so in March 1980 he arranged a strange press conference, at which Rudi talked about his work as an illegal while in disguise and behind a screen. ‘The Soviets didn’t play a gentleman’s game and neither did we. We were in a fucking bar fight with them, we thought they were evil, and we wanted to win,’ remembered one officer on the illegals squad. The FBI men had a certain grudging respect for Rudi, however, and his ‘scary’ level of discipline. Although they were sceptical about the intelligence benefits of using illegals, they also realised that an undetected illegal was always one recruitment away from causing enormous damage, and were motivated to put in the long hours required to track them down.

After the press conference, the FBI moved the family again, to the West Coast. Rudi took on a new identity once more, this time to protect him from potential KGB vengeance. He never renounced his Communism, and in 1986 he tried to return to Czechoslovakia, but was refused a visa. He lived in the United States until his death in 2017. Peter took the name Elliot Holar, began a career in IT, and tried to put his strange childhood behind him. Over the next forty years, he spoke about his entanglement with the KGB only twice: once briefly to his wife before they got married, and once during the research for this book.

20

Diminishing Returns:

The KGB Keeps Going

One morning in August 1979, a few weeks before Rudi and his family vanished into witness protection, a polite but assertive young man named Jack Barsky walked into the offices of the Swift Messenger Service on West Forty-Sixth Street in Manhattan. He asked for a job as a bicycle courier, explaining he had seen an advertisement in the *Daily News.* By the end of his first day on the job, Barsky had delivered eighteen packages to various addresses on the Upper East Side.

Barsky's real name was Albrecht Dittrich; he had been recruited by Directorate S while a promising doctoral chemistry student in Jena, East Germany. His first months in the United States were spent navigating the hurdles presented by his lack of paperwork, getting first a library card, then a Social Security card, and finally the job as a messenger. Barsky's handlers told him to make inroads among the elite in Washington's think tanks and national security circles. Just as with Rudi, they never specified how a newly arrived illegal was supposed to scale such heights without genuine American qualifications. Every weekday for the next nine months, Barsky put on his work clothes – jeans, a flannel shirt, a nylon jacket and a set of yellow waterproofs – and cycled the streets of Manhattan handing off one package after another. On occasion, he made deliveries to the residences of luminaries such as Jackie Onassis and Ronald Lauder, but it was not clear how he could gain any greater access to them. If he had stayed back in East Germany, Barsky thought gloomily, by this point he would probably have been a respected chemistry lecturer. He had no idea that he was walking in the footsteps of many illegals before him, who had also struggled with the exhausting grind of a life spent undercover.

Although he later acquired a well-paid job in an insurance company, Barsky's early concerns were justified. During his years as an illegal in

the United States, Jack Barsky ran no agents, made no recruits, and provided little by way of intelligence except for some computer software code he stole from his employer. He spiralled into depression as he tried to keep two marriages alive: one as Jack Barsky in New York City, and another as Albrecht Dittrich, whose German wife and son waited patiently in East Berlin for his biennial visits. He became an alcoholic. Exhausted by the demands of undercover life, he eventually threw his radio receiver into the Hudson River and sent a message to the Centre claiming he was dying of AIDS. His wife and mother in Germany mourned his tragic disappearance, unaware he was not dead but living with a new family in the United States.[1]

Barsky's experiences as an illegal shine a harsh light on the KGB's continuing obsession with this form of espionage. For several decades, more illegals had failed than succeeded. Those who managed to carry out real espionage tasks inside the Main Enemy, like Rudi Herrmann, usually ended up being caught. Added to the questionable operational results was the psychological burden shouldered by illegals and those around them. Some illegals might have been callous sociopaths, but many were victims of a KGB programme that made a normal emotional life impossible. Galina Linitskaya, one of the few female illegals who worked solo, attempted suicide a few years after being deployed as part of Operation Progress in Prague. One illegal based in Sweden developed extreme paranoia, prompting the Centre to dispatch another illegal to kidnap him and bring him back to the Soviet Union, where he was consigned to a psychiatric unit. The illegal who carried out the exfiltration, Vasily Gordievsky, himself struggled with alcohol abuse, contracted hepatitis B, and, unable to stop drinking heavily, died in 1972 at the age of thirty-nine. Zhan Didenko, an illegal stationed in Britain with his wife, Svetlana, became so paranoid he began to think MI5 had installed listening devices in his shirt buttons; Svetlana dragged him out of the country on the pretext of a holiday in Egypt and marched him into the Soviet embassy in Cairo so the couple could be returned safely to Moscow. The list went on and on.[2]

Vladimir Kryuchkov, appointed head of the KGB's foreign intelligence directorate in 1974, admitted that the life of an illegal often led to 'sad family situations … and sometimes irreconcilable hatred'.[3]

But the top brass believed that this personal sacrifice was an inevitable side effect of serving the motherland, one that simply had to be endured. This attitude had permeated the Centre's thinking on illegals ever since the revolution, but early operatives were at least obtaining invaluable intelligence along the way. Jack Barsky was cycling around New York handing off parcels.

The logistics of creating illegals was getting harder, too. An internal KGB report laid out the situation frankly: 'We have to overcome incredible difficulties in order to create a new person who at the age of twenty-five or thirty should appear and enter a different society, and these difficulties are increasing with every passing year.'[4] By the late 1970s, there were hundreds of Line N officers working out of Soviet embassies. They tried to make recruits in tax offices, archives and church parishes, in order to lift data from official records and help find candidates for dead double identities. Where it was not possible to recruit directly, they concocted various ingenious schemes. In Peru, one officer managed to borrow a set of records on the pretence that he was searching for war criminals. In London, a Line N man became friendly with a clerk at the St Pancras registry office and explained that the Soviet embassy's doctor wanted to peruse death records for a dissertation about mortality rates.[5] Once a possible dead double candidate was identified, there followed dozens of bureaucratic steps: checking for living relatives, making sure there was no news coverage or police investigation at the time of the death, and then working out how to request a duplicate birth certificate and having a reliable address to send it to. Line N bosses wrote whole manuals on how to manage each of the steps.

Directorate S had come to resemble a Rube Goldberg machine. Its convoluted, sprawling networks supported operatives in the field whose espionage returns were increasingly limited. The obvious conclusion to be drawn was that the use of illegals, such a brilliant solution to the Soviet Union's intelligence-gathering requirements in the 1920s and 1930s, no longer made much sense.

Yet as the 1970s went on, instead of scaling down the illegals programme, Directorate S continued to expand it. Whenever there was a hole in possibilities for traditional intelligence gathering, the KGB tried to fill it with illegals. One example was Communist China, where

bilateral relations deteriorated as each nation denounced the other as deviating from true Marxism. As the stand-off intensified, Directorate S stepped up efforts to create Chinese illegals, either by using Chinese refugees living in the Soviet Union or by training people from the Asiatic ethnic groups living in Soviet Central Asia. The KGB used various infiltration routes, including stowing illegals in the ventilation pipes of the Trans-Siberian train from Moscow to Beijing. But most of these missions broke down quickly. Learning the language to a convincing native level was beyond most of the Soviet recruits, while the Chinese émigrés made repeated faux pas when introduced back into their home country after long absence. For one illegal, his KGB file noted despairingly, 'the need to change metric measurements into Chinese ones in his head led to suspicious pauses in conversation'. Most of the Chinese illegals had to be withdrawn immediately; one emigre who had undergone extensive training, and was seen as a promising prospect for infiltration, secretly boarded a plane to the United States in 1983 and defected.[6]

For other 'difficult' ethnicities, the KGB sought recruits abroad. In 1975, Directorate S asked Communist Party leaders in Iraq and Syria to find candidates who might be trained in Moscow for use as illegals against Saudi Arabia.[7] There was also a whole network of franchised illegal operations in Soviet satellite states, overseen by the KGB but run by the local intelligence services. Cuban intelligence handlers were sent for year-long stints to Moscow to learn from Directorate S and documented their own illegals as Mexicans, Nicaraguans, Chileans and Colombians. In 1976, Moscow and Havana agreed to prepare two or three joint illegals for work against the Main Enemy.[8] In Eastern Europe, the KGB ordered the Hungarian service to recruit three illegals per year for infiltration into the West, documenting one as an Italian, one as a German and one as an Austrian. The Bulgarians were tasked with planting five illegals in Turkey and five in Greece, disguised as Western businessmen.[9] The KGB did not trust its partner agencies enough to tell them that it was also sending its own illegals into their countries disguised as Westerners, even as it worked with them to create new illegals to use in the West.

These junior partners sometimes made significant improvements to the KGB's tradecraft, despite Moscow's patronising approach toward them. Czechoslovakia's StB, for example, came up with an obvious simplification: it allowed illegals to use their real names. Karl and Hana Koecher arrived in New York in 1965 using their genuine biographies, but with one altered detail: they claimed to be refugees disgusted with Communist rule, meaning they could use their real educational qualifications to gain access to policy-making and dissident circles in the United States. Karl landed a job at Radio Free Europe, studied for a doctorate with the influential foreign policy hawk Zbigniew Brzezinski, and became a naturalised US citizen in 1971. A year later, he passed the CIA's screening test and was hired as a translator and analyst by the agency's Soviet section. The success of the Koechers made a mockery of the torturous layers of work required to create new identities for illegals.[10]

The KGB took note, training a small number of Soviet Jews in the basics of illegal work, then including them in the list of those allowed to leave the Soviet Union and immigrate to the United States.[11] But the bulk of the programme remained wedded to tradition and retained the tiresomely time-consuming concept of training Soviet citizens to impersonate foreigners. In 1978, Kryuchkov sent every KGB resident in Soviet embassies around the globe a top-secret memo, noting that espionage success depended 'on a skillful combination of legal and illegal forms of work'. It was a line that could have come from one of Lenin's pamphlets for Bolsheviks working abroad in the early twentieth century.[12]

Why did the KGB stick so doggedly to a system that no longer seemed worth the enormous time and effort it demanded? Partly, the institutional memory of the successes during the early Soviet period and the roots in the Bolshevik underground kept the organisation wedded to illegal work as a key part of its internal mythology. It was also clear that short-term illegal assignments, such as Yuri Drozdov's missions as the Baron von Hohenstein, could still be fruitful. And then there was the chance that the Cold War might turn hot. Should that happen, today's delivery boy could become a vital link in a communications network during World War III.

The Soviet system's resistance to innovation also played a part in the decision to plough on with the illegals programme. By the end of the 1970s, Brezhnev was in such poor health as to be functionally useless as a leader. He wore a pacemaker and a hearing aid; under his voluminous brows his eyes were glazed and vacant; and he struggled even with simple movements. As early as 1974, when Andropov appointed Kryuchkov head of foreign intelligence and took him to the Kremlin to meet Brezhnev, the general secretary could hardly manage to rise from his chair to offer greetings. After a brief exchange, he again struggled to stand upright, hugged Kryuchkov, and inexplicably started crying.[13] Kryuchkov felt he had come to visit a geriatric relative, not the leader of one of the world's two superpowers. Brezhnev would remain in charge for a further eight years.

At the KGB, Andropov also developed a reputation for dubious decisions. Soon after appointing the widely disliked Kryuchkov, he made the KGB's Cairo resident, Vadim Kirpichenko, head of Directorate S. Kirpichenko was a talented analyst of the Middle East, but had no experience with illegals and was daunted by his new role. Meanwhile, Drozdov, who lived and breathed illegal work but had never previously visited the United States, was sent to New York. Bound by the KGB's culture of obedience, subordinates were unable to question this litany of bizarre appointments.

There was one more important reason for the continued obsession with the illegals programme, which requires entering the mindset of the Soviet 1970s to understand. The KGB had a reasonably sophisticated understanding of the mood in Soviet society, from its wide network of informers and eavesdroppers, but its grasp of the West was much weaker. Even among diplomats and KGB officers stationed in the United States, there were few who genuinely understood American society, mainly because they did not experience much of it.[14] The Riverdale residential compound in the Bronx and the Soviet mission to the UN were microcosms of Soviet life, with regular party meetings, indoctrination sessions and screenings of Soviet films. Drozdov, during his tenure as resident in New York, further tightened the rules for Soviet diplomats stationed there, insisting that any personal contact with an American needed to be approved in advance by his KGB men. Even the wives of diplomats were advised not to walk around the city unaccompanied.[15]

Drozdov himself rarely left the Soviet mission; during four years in New York, he managed a drive to Niagara Falls and a very occasional evening at the theatre. He neither saw nor understood much of American society.[16]

Seen through the prism of a free and open society, training Jack Barsky for years, only to have him cycle around New York delivering packages, was a ridiculous use of resources. But even if Barsky produced little by way of top-secret intelligence, the reports he and others sent on the mood in the West contained insights from genuine interactions that could not be present in other KGB or diplomatic channels. Andropov frequently met with illegals on their trips back to Moscow, peppering them with questions about life in the West. For the reclusive KGB chairman, who almost never interacted with foreigners from outside the socialist bloc, talking to illegals was the best insight he could get into the mindset of the Main Enemy.

It is worth considering the following detail: in the late 1970s, there were roughly 290 million people living in the Soviet Union. Just a tiny sliver of them had permission to cross its borders: a privileged segment of artists, athletes, dignitaries and the occasional tourist group. Wherever they went, they were accompanied by KGB minders. Even the KGB's own officers in foreign embassies were watched over by members of the agency's counterintelligence department. The illegals of Directorate S were the only Soviet citizens allowed to move freely in the West without oversight: around 100 people, from a population of 290 million. The illegals saw and heard things that no other Soviet citizen, even those in the elites, could dream of experiencing. It is no wonder that their analysis of the West was so prized by the KGB hierarchy, even if it was often little more than the musings of a delivery boy.

21

Eleven Days in Kabul:

The Birth of the ‘Fighting Illegal’

At the end of 1979, Andropov called Yuri Drozdov back from New York to become head of Directorate S, the job he had always wanted. Drozdov would go on to run the illegals programme for more than a decade, devoting every waking minute to his work.[1] His days of playing Nazi barons were over, but he still travelled frequently. Usually, he flew to Havana, East Berlin, or other Eastern bloc capitals to discuss the growth of the illegals programmes in friendly socialist states. Occasionally, he travelled to non-aligned countries to meet with illegals in person. He had a stack of passports in his office safe and rarely travelled under his own name. When in Moscow, he spent many long days shuttling across the city in a limousine, dark curtains drawn across the back windows, to meet with returned illegals, whom he would amaze with his encyclopaedic knowledge of their personal files.

Alongside his relentless devotion to the cause, Drozdov retained an illegal’s ability to be charming, unusual among the rigid KGB generals directing operations. He wowed those under his command with simple human niceties, such as standing and stretching out a hand to greet juniors who entered his office, rather than staying seated behind his desk. On weekends, he would call subordinates into the office to play pétanque in the corridors and canvass their opinions, which in the context of the rigid KGB hierarchy was outright eccentricity. But underneath this easy manner was an iron will as resolute as that of any KGB general. His jovial charm could metamorphose into untrammelled fury in a matter of seconds. On one occasion, Drozdov was giving a toast at a gathering for the fiftieth birthday of one of his department heads and halfway through recalled an error the officer had recently made. He launched into an increasingly angry tirade about the man’s incompetence, which only

ceased when he was politely reminded that he was meant to be lauding the birthday boy, not reprimanding him.[2]

Soon after Drozdov's return from New York, Andropov called him to his office and offered him tea with lemon. Neither man had any doubt that illegal work should remain one of the most important elements of the KGB's foreign operations, but they discussed some of the failures over the past decade and what might be done to avoid repeats. Then, ostensibly as an afterthought, Andropov said he would like Drozdov to fly to Kabul for a few days, to take the temperature in the Afghan capital. Unflappable as ever, Drozdov assented with a nod. The upcoming mission would define the way he ran the illegals programme for the next decade.

In April 1978, a group of local Communists, together with Soviet-trained army generals, had overthrown and murdered Afghanistan's president. They proclaimed a new Marxist dawn in the country and installed the Afghan Communist Nur Mohammad Taraki as head of a new government. It meant Moscow now had a potential ally along a sensitive stretch of the Soviet Union's southern border. But Afghanistan was a largely rural, agrarian country, far from the conditions that orthodox Marxist theory stipulated were required for proletarian revolution. There was widespread resistance to the new government, and in March 1979 more than five thousand people were killed during the quelling of an armed uprising in Herat.[3] In Moscow, the Politburo decided to send financial aid and an additional five hundred advisers to the country, but stopped short of authorising a military intervention.

Moscow was also worried about an increasingly bitter power struggle inside Afghanistan's Communist Party. Hafizullah Amin, an ambitious deputy prime minister who had studied in the United States, was chipping away at the authority of Prime Minister Taraki. Amin, who kept a portrait of Stalin on his desk, brushed off exhortations from Soviet advisers that the party needed to expand its support base. 'Comrade Stalin showed us how to build socialism in a backward country: it's painful to begin with but afterwards everything turns out just fine,' he said.[4]

In September, just a few days after Taraki had returned from a trip to Moscow, Amin manoeuvred him out of power. The next month, Amin's

men grabbed Taraki unawares, smothered him with a pillow, and buried his body under cover of darkness. Publicly, it was announced that Taraki had died of ‘a brief and serious illness’, but Amin’s lies didn’t fool the Kremlin. The leadership in Moscow feared, probably rightly, that he was more interested in personal power than in promoting Marxism or Soviet influence, and was convinced, probably wrongly, that he had made an alliance with the CIA. In extreme secrecy, the contours of a new plan took shape in Moscow. Babrak Karmal, a Communist who had gone into hiding in Czechoslovakia after falling out with Amin, was brought to Moscow in November and lined up as a replacement leader. On 12 December, the Politburo took the decision to depose Amin and deploy Soviet forces in the country.

A few months earlier, Directorate S had flown one of its illegals into Kabul for just this eventuality. Mutalim Talybov had previously been posted to Greece, Cyprus, Switzerland and Morocco, posing as the Iranian citizen Ikhtar Resht. In 1978, he was recalled to Moscow amid fears that his cover identity had been compromised.[5] A year later, he was briefed in Moscow about an extremely delicate mission to Kabul. His fluent Persian, very similar to the Dari spoken in much of Afghanistan, would be crucial. He flew into Kabul in September as part of a larger group of Directorate S officers, in the guise of an interpreter.[6] On arrival, he took on a new identity and obtained work as a chef in Amin’s kitchen, possibly through a recommendation from one of the KGB officers stationed in Kabul. Ordinarily, Directorate S went to enormous lengths to mask Soviet links to illegals. But despite the worsening relations between the two countries, Amin thought it was a status symbol to have Soviet-trained men on his security detail and staff.

Talybov brought with him to Kabul a colourless and odourless poison developed in a KGB laboratory in Moscow. The plan was for Karmal to take over after Amin’s sudden death and issue a call for Soviet ‘fraternal assistance’ to legitimise a subsequent invasion. On December 17, five days after the Politburo approved this secret plan, Talybov decanted some of the poison into a bottle of Pepsi meant for Amin. But before Amin drank the Pepsi, his son-in-law Asadullah, head of his security service, took a small sip to test it. Asadullah quickly fell ill and developed acute

hepatitis. He was flown to Moscow for urgent treatment, where Soviet doctors saved his life.[7]

The morning after the failed poisoning attempt, Andropov dispatched Drozdov to Kabul. It was an icily cold December night by the time he landed at Bagram air base. Just a small handful of intelligence officers on the ground in Kabul knew there was about to be a dramatic change in Moscow's policy; even the Soviet ambassador was in the dark. In a war room at the embassy, Drozdov met with Vadim Kirpichenko, his predecessor as head of Directorate S, and Colonel Vasily Kolesnik of the GRU, Soviet military intelligence. The three of them drew up a plan to topple Amin. As well as Talybov inside the palace, Drozdov had the use of two battalions of Soviet troops in various disguises. They were run by Directorate S and would become the prototype for a new type of 'fighting illegal'.

A short ride outside Moscow, behind an unmarked gate topped with barbed wire, Directorate S kept a facility known informally as the Saboteurs' School. It had been there since the Second World War, when it was used as a base to train partisans who would be dropped behind enemy lines. During the mid-1970s, the school began to call up young KGB officers from the provinces, usually those with knowledge of at least one foreign language, for intensive six-month courses.[8] During their time at the Saboteurs' School, recruits were put through unrelenting physical exercises and endurance training. They studied map work, explosives and sabotage operations. They trained in hand-to-hand combat and knife fighting. From a nearby airfield, they ascended to practise parachute jumps.[9]

At the end of the six-month course, the students returned to their KGB day jobs, but were kept in the Directorate S reserve. During the hypothetical 'Special Period', as the build-up to a potential war with the United States was known in KGB parlance, they would be called up to form special battalions of between six and twelve 'fighting illegals'. Each group would include a commander, two deputies in charge of intelligence gathering and sabotage, a radio operator and an explosives specialist. They would then be infiltrated behind enemy lines.[10] In the summer of 1979, the regimen at the Saboteurs' School suddenly grew more intense,

and the trainees realised they would not be heading home. Instead, they were deployed to Kabul in late 1979 in two units, named Grom and Zenit. They were issued with uncomfortable and ill-fitting Afghan army uniforms made of coarse camel hair.[11]

A secret army special forces detachment had also been sent to Kabul. Known as the Muslim Battalion, it was made up of Soviet Central Asians who spoke Turkmen, Uzbek and Tajik, languages spoken by many in Afghanistan. They had also been issued grey Afghan uniforms, and Amin had happily signed off on a plan for them to guard his palace, thinking it was a clever way to gain protection without an official Soviet military presence in the country. Despite his Stalinist knack for plotting, Amin was surprisingly naïve about the possibility that his Soviet backers might turn against him.

Drozdov developed a plan to seize several sites across the city simultaneously using Grom, Zenit and the Muslim Battalion. He would oversee the attack on Amin's palace, the key target, after the illegal Talybov, still stationed inside, had neutralised Amin with another poisoning attempt. The Tajbeg seemed nigh impregnable, strategically perched atop a steep hill overgrown with thick shrubbery. All the roads leading up to it were mined, bar one, a serpentine track covered by machine gun and artillery positions. In total, twenty-five hundred troops fortified the structure, and the security had been reviewed and enhanced by Amin's KGB advisers in Kabul, unaware of what Drozdov was cooking up behind their backs.

On 25 December, the men of the Muslim Battalion, dressed in their decoy Afghan army uniforms, took up 'defensive' positions around the Tajbeg palace. Only their top commander was informed that the battalion's real assignment would soon change. That evening, the commanders held a banquet for officers of Amin's personal guard, ostensibly to celebrate their new status as colleagues. The Russians supplied vodka and caviar from the Soviet embassy, and toasts were raised to the unbreakable bonds of Soviet–Afghan friendship. Drozdov attended in the guise of Captain Lebedev, a technical adviser to the battalion. He wore a grey Afghan uniform like everyone else.

Two days later, Drozdov invited Kolesnik, his co-conspirator from the GRU, to the Russian *banya* at the embassy guesthouse early in the

morning. According to a superstition he had held since the war years, Drozdov believed it was necessary to go into battle in clean underwear. The two men sat naked and sweating in the *banya* cabin, barely able to see each other through the thick swirls of steam. Cleaned up, and underwear duly changed, they made swift work of a whole bottle of brandy between the two of them, in silence.

At lunchtime, Amin invited the whole of his leadership team, as well as several Soviet advisers, to the palace, to celebrate news that the Soviets had agreed to offer Afghanistan significant military help. 'All is going well,' he told his guests, explaining that he had just got off the phone with the Soviet foreign minister, Andrei Gromyko. 'We are discussing the best way to inform the world about this Soviet military assistance.' After lunch, Amin's guests moved into another hall for tea service. Many began to feel groggy and some started vomiting. This time, instead of carefully selecting a beverage that Amin might drink, Talybov had laced the entire banquet with poison. As Amin's condition worsened, his terrified head of security called the Soviet embassy begging for help. The embassy had no idea about Drozdov's plans and dispatched two military doctors to the palace. They entered to find guests splayed out in unnatural positions, with those who were still conscious groaning and writhing in pain. Amin was dressed only in his underpants and barely conscious, his eyes rolling and with a weak pulse. They dragged him to the bathroom, restored his breathing, and pumped his stomach. It was a close call, but his condition eventually stabilised. Talybov's mission had been sabotaged by its own secrecy.

Around the same time as the guests began falling to the ground at the Tajbeg palace, Drozdov and Kolesnik called a briefing for the senior officers of the Muslim Battalion, Grom and Zenit. Amin was cooperating with the CIA, they explained, and therefore he had to be removed. There was a stunned silence, and many wondered why, if Amin was a CIA asset, he had wanted Soviet troops defending him.[12] Still, no one questioned the orders. They were to shoot anyone seen trying to leave the palace on sight. That included Amin, assuming he was not already dead from poisoning.[13] The men were given white armbands so they could distinguish each other from the men defending the palace, who would be wearing the same grey uniforms.

At 6.45 p.m., a small group of officers from Zenit left their villa in three cars, placing a time-activated bomb down a manhole at the spot where Kabul's main communications wires were concentrated. It detonated with a blast that could be heard across the city. The operation was under way. Two flares illuminated the palace, and the Muslim Battalion's anti-aircraft guns began firing. Zenit men leaped into armoured vehicles and were assaulted by rapid bursts of gunfire as they neared the palace. They jumped out and crawled the rest of the way along the icy ground, rushing at the palace in ones and twos. A grenade took out the electricity, plunging the building into darkness. Inside, the white armbands counted for little in the gloom; the main identifying factor for a friendly soldier was whether or not he was letting out a stream of Slavic swearwords. Talybov came rushing out from the kitchens to cheer on his compatriots but quickly retreated when he saw the chaos unfolding.[14]

Amin was on the upper floor of the palace, lurching through the corridors clad in his underwear and a T-shirt, an intravenous drip in each arm and his terrified young son gripping his leg. Too late, he realised it was his supposed Soviet friends who were attacking him. It is not clear whether he was killed in the crossfire or executed. By the time the fighting was over, all the windows had been blown out, the carpets were soaked in blood, and many of the rooms were in flames. Roughly three hundred Afghans were killed, their bodies buried in a hastily dug pit outside. Amin's corpse was rolled up in a bloodied carpet and placed separately in an unmarked grave. Among the Soviets, there were twenty-nine fatalities as well as seventy-four wounded.[15] It was only when the injured began arriving at the embassy that the Soviet ambassador realised something was afoot.

In the end, the operation was a mixture of ingeniously executed intrigue and chaotic farce. Had Directorate S's obsession with secrecy been slightly relaxed, Amin would have been dead from Talybov's poison, and storming the palace could have been a mop-up operation with minimal violence. On the other hand, the Soviets had pulled off a daring coup without resorting to airpower, and with almost no civilian casualties.

Karmal assumed control the day after the coup and held a reception for Kirpichenko, Drozdov and some of the special forces officers to thank them for 'helping' his ascent to power. The Soviets introduced troops into

the country, publicly this time, to prop up the new regime. International reaction to the invasion was swift. President Carter told his cabinet that it represented ‘the greatest threat to world peace since the Second World War’ and called for a boycott of the upcoming Moscow Olympics.[16] The details of the coup preceding the invasion remained a well-kept secret for many years. The fighters of Grom and Zenit were allowed to say they had been posted briefly to Afghanistan as ‘advisers’, but no more than that, even to their KGB supervisors back home. As for ordinary Soviet citizens, all they were told, in a terse news bulletin, was that the ‘progressive elements of Afghan society’ had overthrown Amin and a ‘limited contingent’ of Soviet troops was now being introduced to maintain stability in the country.

Drozdov was irritated by the botched poisoning, but impressed with how Grom and Zenit had acted in a live military situation. He would spend the next decade refining the concept of fighting illegals, in preparation for a potential big war with the United States. For Talybov, his haphazard poisoning mission appears to have been his last act as an illegal. He was later posted to the Soviet embassy in Hanoi as a Line N officer.[17]

In January 1980, Drozdov helped draw up a withdrawal plan for Soviet forces in Afghanistan, but the document lay untouched in his safe for a decade as the military entanglement dragged on, costing thousands of lives. It was nine years and fifty-two days after the storming of Amin’s palace when the last Soviet soldier left Afghanistan. By that time, an explosion of criticism about the dismal war had become a major factor in a process leading toward something that was unthinkable to most observers on both sides of the Cold War in late 1979: the collapse of the Soviet Union.

PART FIVE

Collapse and Resurrection

22

The Threat of War:

Rising Tensions and New Illegals

Students and professors filed into a cavernous hall inside the Tomsk State University library and took their seats in a sombre hush. The hastily convened gathering was one of thousands of similar events taking place simultaneously across the Soviet Union on 11 November 1982. A member of the university's party committee approached the lectern and announced in a loud, clear voice, 'The Soviet people, and the whole of progressive humankind, have suffered an enormous loss.'

There followed a minute of silence.

The previous day, a heart attack had ended Leonid Brezhnev's long and slow decline. Before making a public announcement, the Politburo met and decided that the KGB chairman, Yuri Andropov, would become the new general secretary. The next morning, at eleven Moscow time, Soviet television and radio broadcast the news. It was mid-afternoon in Tomsk, nearly two thousand miles east in the heart of Siberia. The university cancelled the remaining classes of the day to make time for mourning. There was an open microphone for those present to share their grief. Unlike the genuine shock that had greeted the death of Stalin three decades earlier, this time the lamentations felt like the fulfilment of an obligation.

Among the speakers that afternoon was an earnest second-year history student named Elena Vavilova. She paid tribute to the great leader who had passed away, leaving his citizens orphaned. As she spoke, tears rolled down her cheeks. Many of Elena's fellow students found the spectacle bizarre. The mumbling, geriatric Brezhnev had long been a laughing stock among the more educated segment of Soviet youth. For most history students in Tomsk, the quotations from Brezhnev they were forced to screwdriver into their coursework did not reflect a genuine belief in the genius of the Soviet leader, and they lived parallel lives to

the bombastic official propaganda, ignoring it or poking fun. On hearing that the notoriously severe Andropov would now lead their country, some shared a subversive joke: ‘Uh-oh, the KGB is taking over, now they will send everyone to Siberia! Lucky for us that we’re here already.’

Now one of their number was shedding tears at the death of a man who had struggled to string together a coherent sentence for the best part of a decade. Perhaps Elena was really devastated at Brezhnev’s death, or perhaps this was a demonstrative display of political reliability to the KGB handlers who might have already been watching over her.[1]

Tomsk State was known as one of the best universities in the country, despite its distance from Moscow. Elena’s family was closely linked to the university; her father was a professor of physics and her mother a teaching assistant. At school, she gained a reputation as a bright student and a dedicated member of the Komsomol, the Young Communist League. In 1976 she was selected to travel to Artek, a camp in Crimea where only the best students or those with family connections were sent for a month of summer sport and patriotic education, and in 1982 she won a place at Tomsk State.[2]

History lectures were held in a grand white neoclassical structure fronted by four large columns and topped with a golden spire. The faculty was run by Izrail Razgon, a veteran historian who had been awarded the Stalin Prize in 1943 for his telling of the Bolshevik rise to power, only to be exiled from Moscow to Tomsk during an anti-Jewish campaign in Stalin’s late years. Nearing eighty by the time Elena arrived, he was still an ardent Communist and could sometimes be found drunkenly singing ‘The Internationale’ in the faculty corridors.

Soon after starting her studies, Elena met Andrei Bezrukov. Two years her senior, he had grown up in a small Siberian town where his father worked as a geologist and his mother as a meteorologist. He started in the physics faculty at Tomsk, but later switched to history, an unusual move that suggests he may have already been recruited by the KGB and earmarked for possible work abroad. In the history department, students received intensive language training and had access to foreign texts.

Andrei decided to write his dissertation about US foreign policy in China, while Elena wrote about the French historian Philippe Ariès, whose 1977 book, *L’homme devant la mort*, investigated changes in

Western attitudes toward death. There were eight English lessons each week, and students were often required to give presentations to the group in English, French or German. Teaching was strictly along Marxist lines, but history students were among the only undergraduates who could request access to the ‘special archive’ in the university library, which housed potentially subversive literature. There were several levels of access; it was not possible, for example, for undergraduates to request works by Soviet dissidents published abroad. But if Andrei or Elena wanted to read works by non-Marxist Western historians, they could ask their tutors to sign a special request form. The librarians would summon up the forbidden texts from the basement.

In the months after their meeting, Elena and Andrei went on dates to the cinema and theatre. Occasionally, Andrei visited Elena at home, where he made an impression on her parents as a studious young man. To those around them, she seemed more easy-going than he was: her dark brown eyes sparkled with inquisitiveness, while Andrei’s gaze was impenetrable, and his manner rather haughty. On weekends, some students had parties in the dormitories, where they drank cheap Bulgarian wine and danced to bootleg recordings of Western bands, but nobody remembers seeing Andrei and Elena at these gatherings.

Andropov was sixty-eight when he became general secretary. He was increasingly paranoid, and his health was deteriorating rapidly. He found it difficult to concentrate, and he often interrupted his interlocutors with off-topic observations.[3] He was hardly the dynamic new leader that was so desperately needed to inject new energy into the Soviet cause, and he spent large portions of his time inside the same clinic where Brezhnev had just died.

Nevertheless, all seemed far from lost to the men running the country. Oil prices peaked at $35 per barrel in 1980, bringing in much-needed revenue, while the United States seemed to be on the back foot globally. During the mid-1970s, Angola and Mozambique had fallen to regimes sympathetic to the Soviet Union, and the US withdrawal from Vietnam had left Cambodia and Laos to become Communist too. But there was increasing alarm in the Kremlin over what seemed to be growing American willingness for confrontation. The new president, Ronald Reagan, had rubbished détente, describing it as ‘what a farmer has with

his turkey, until Thanksgiving Day'. In early 1983, he made a speech calling the Soviet Union an 'evil empire' and Communism 'a bizarre chapter in human history whose last pages are even now being written'.[4] He announced the biggest increase in US military spending in peacetime history, promising to double it by 1986, and he dramatically increased the budget of the National Security Agency.[5] The Americans were suddenly speaking of the Cold War not as a fixture of life but as a battle that it was possible to win decisively.

During the tense year of 1983, the two superpowers came closer to nuclear war than at any time since the Cuban missile crisis. The United States pulled ahead in the arms race, and Soviet leaders worried that Washington was planning to launch a quick first strike. KGB residents around the globe were told to devote hours of manpower each week to Operation RYAN, for which they were to be permanently on the lookout for signs of an impending nuclear attack. Clues could include lights being left on later than usual in the windows of Western ministries of defence, or any unusual activity in other government buildings.

The two superpowers now had more than eighteen thousand nuclear warheads between them, and the newest Pershing missiles, which Washington planned to place in Europe in the summer of 1983, could hit Moscow six minutes after launch.[6] In November, as Andropov's health worsened, a major NATO military exercise called Able Archer simulated a conflagration with the Soviet Union that led to all-out nuclear war. In Moscow, army and air force commanders wondered if the supposed exercise was cover for a first nuclear strike. The world appeared to be on the brink of what was known in KGB parlance as the 'Special Period' – the early stages of a major hot war between the United States and the Soviet Union.

In Tomsk, 'peace demonstrations' became a feature of campus life. These were taking place across the Soviet Union, promoted by the government, and saw students voice angry demands for the Americans to back down. Elena often wrote about the movement for the student newspaper, castigating the Americans for threatening global stability. 'The voice of our university collective blends together with the voices of millions of people across the world,' she wrote in one article.[7]

By this point, victory in the Great Patriotic War rivalled the October Revolution as the most important event in Soviet mythology. The bright future of socialist plenty seemed worryingly far away, so the leadership instead looked to the past for inspiration. Moreover, most families had an intimate connection to the war. Elena's grandfather, who had taken part in the battle for Stalingrad and the Soviet capture of Berlin, frequently told her war stories as she grew up. He had been relatively lucky, losing only a finger, but many of his comrades had perished.[8] Each year on Victory Day, 9 May, students and professors gathered around the university's war memorial, a pensive soldier cast in chrome, shield in hand and head bowed. In 1983, the university rector told those gathered on Victory Day that the 'dark forces' in the world should recall May 1945 and remember that the Soviet people would do whatever it took to defend the gains of socialism.[9] Older professors gave first-hand accounts of the horrors of the war and drew parallels between it and the American warmongers who wanted a new clash. These two conflicts – one real and one hypothetical – formed the basis of Elena's patriotism and her willingness to serve her country.

Once a week, Elena met with a middle-aged man in a scruffy jacket. She found him, at the appointed hour, in a vacant apartment not far from the university. They talked about life, her studies and sometimes even politics. These chats were a secret she kept from her parents, her friends and even Andrei. After about a year of these weekly discussions, she arrived one week to find a second man waiting for her. He told her he came from Moscow, and he wanted to know whether Elena would be interested in beginning preparations for an important job abroad. She was worried about what Andrei would say, but she need not have been. It turned out he had been meeting the same man.

Much later, Elena said that neither she nor Andrei ever found out which of them was the initial recruit, but normal KGB procedure suggests it was Andrei. It is probable that, like Yuri Linov and many other illegals, he was recruited first and began or continued his relationship with Elena only after his handlers gave their approval. It is possible they even suggested Elena to him as a suitable, pre-vetted candidate from an ideologically sound family. Drozdov's spotters would have been impressed by the way she combined intense ideological orthodoxy with social ease. Despite her ability to write newspaper

articles in the hectoring tone of a party ideologue, Elena came across as more free-thinking than Andrei to the couple's friends. 'There was something un-Soviet about her,' recalled one university acquaintance. 'The way she dressed and the way she carried herself was just like a Westerner. Or, at least, what I expected a Westerner to be like, having never met one.'[10]

Elena and Andrei were just two of more than a thousand Soviet students being evaluated that year for their potential to become the next generation of Directorate S illegals. Almost all would be rejected at various stages of the process. Some would be discarded altogether, while those who showed more promise might be considered for training at the KGB academy, which could lead to a counterintelligence job keeping an eye on dissidents or a posting under diplomatic cover in a legal residency abroad. The more athletic among them might be sent to the Saboteurs' School to train as fighting illegals. But occasionally, if candidates possessed the right combination of qualities, they would be sent to Moscow for full-time training. Andrei and Elena passed their tests with flying colours.

Andrei, like almost every Soviet schoolchild, had idealised Stierlitz when *Seventeen Moments of Spring* aired on television in the early 1970s, and he was drawn by the supposed romance of life as a spy. But he also believed the Soviet way of life was under threat. He wanted to help, convinced that if the Soviet Union became weak, the Americans would not hesitate to wipe its enemy from the face of the planet.[11] When he graduated in 1984, the KGB decided to move both him and Elena to Moscow. They wed in Tomsk before departing; she wore a long white dress with a white band tied in her hair, while he was in a sleek, well-fitting suit. Their KGB curator stood unobserved, across the street, and watched the newly-weds emerge from the registry office. Elena's mother hosted a celebratory dinner at the family's apartment.[12] Elena told her parents she was going to work at an important scientific institute in Moscow and would finish her degree remotely.

The move to the capital was Andrei and Elena's first step toward the West and away from their closeted Siberian upbringing. Tomsk was one of many 'closed' Soviet cities; a secret settlement nine miles away housed the Soviet Union's first large-scale nuclear power plant.[13] Even

Soviet citizens needed a special permit to travel to Tomsk, and foreign visitors were unheard of. It was, in short, a strange place to look for people who would feel at ease slipping into the skins of carefree Westerners. Andrei and Elena were undoubtedly an intelligent and talented pair, but their recruitment reflected the increasingly absurd lengths the KGB had to go to in order to create new illegals.

By the end of 1983, Andropov was too weak to leave his hospital bed. On New Year's Eve, doctors allowed the fading Soviet leader to sip from a glass of champagne with a small group of visitors, including Kryuchkov, the head of the KGB's foreign intelligence department, who had been at his side since the Hungarian uprising in 1956. Throughout his long career, Andropov had never shown a hint of emotion even to his closest colleagues. Now his eyes welled with tears. 'Thank you. Farewell,' he whispered to Kryuchkov.[14] He died six weeks later.

Andropov had been capable enough to diagnose the Soviet Union's failings, but had no idea how to fix them. As KGB chairman, he had enjoyed full access to the reams of secret reports detailing what people were saying privately. He knew there were chronic shortages of consumer goods, that the standard of living in the Soviet Union was low, and that alcoholism was rampant. In a rare moment of candour, he once confided to a subordinate that he hoped the Soviet Union could one day adopt a more open system. 'But only in fifteen or twenty years, when standards of living have improved. You wouldn't believe what kind of mood there is in the country right now,' he said bitterly.[15] Instead, his legacy, after fifteen years in charge of the KGB and fifteen months running the Soviet Union, was a culture of intense paranoia and a system that stifled all initiative.

The battle against intellectual and cultural dissent continued after Andropov left the KGB to become general secretary, and illegals were increasingly part of the effort. Moscow remained so mistrustful of its supposed allies in Eastern Europe that it continued and expanded Operation Progress, the name given to missions inside the Soviet bloc that had started with the Prague Spring.[16] Similar operations also began inside the Soviet Union itself, to test the loyalty of suspected dissidents. The KGB was particularly wary of Jews; illegals posing as Western businessmen, strongly hinting they worked for the CIA, approached

Soviet Jewish leaders to see if they were willing to betray the Soviet Union.[17]

The illegals themselves were not immune to the pervasive need to screen for signs of dissent. Drozdov's directorate began to think up ever more elaborate ways to ensure that they remained loyal, both during their long training periods and on visits back to Moscow from the field. Often, amid the bonhomie of the boozy banquets that illegals enjoyed whenever they returned to Moscow, an odourless and tasteless psychotropic drug known as SP-17, developed in a KGB laboratory, was slipped into the illegal's drink. The drug induced a feeling of warmth and trust and left the victim with no memory of discussions that took place while under its influence. The banquet then became an interrogation session to ensure the illegal was still politically reliable. One former officer at Directorate S claimed he found evidence of the use of SP-17 in every illegal operational file he saw.[18]

It also became common practice to install listening devices in the apartments where illegals lived while in Moscow. Several illegals, even at late stages of training or after their deployment, were kicked off the programme when the Centre decided they were no longer reliable. One Latvian illegal was foolish enough to confide in his wife, on a visit back to Moscow in the early 1980s, that he thought people in the West lived more freely than those in the Soviet Union, and wondered out loud what Latvia would be like if it were independent. The incriminating words were logged in his file, though it is not recorded whether he was kicked off the programme.[19] The KGB demanded the impossible from its recruits: an operative had to be intelligent, flexible and worldly enough to slip into the guise of a Westerner, yet so ideologically firm that even in private moments at home he or she would remain oblivious to the obvious flaws in Soviet society.

In 1982, Directorate S moved from the KGB headquarters at Lubyanka into a complex at Yasenevo on the outskirts of Moscow, where the rest of the KGB's foreign intelligence staff had been based for the previous decade. Yasenevo was known as the Forest, for its verdant location outside the city centre, and it was far more pleasant than Lubyanka, where the spirit of the 1930s purges still hung in the air, weighing on employees as they walked through the dingy corridors to

offices with dark wood panelling. Yasenevo felt like a luxury resort in comparison. Built according to a design by Finnish architects, the complex included a twenty-two-storey office block, along with saunas, a swimming pool, tennis courts, a well-stocked grocery and a modern medical clinic. The leadership lived in pretty houses dotted around the premises, while everyone else arrived at work on a fleet of unmarked buses that collected officers from meeting points across Moscow each morning. Directorate S was given the fourteenth through twentieth floors in the office building.

The nineteenth floor housed the office of the ultrasecret Twelfth Department, a new addition to Directorate S that dealt with biological espionage. Although the Soviet Union had signed an international convention banning the development of biological weapons, Soviet leaders were convinced Western countries were violating it, and were determined not to fall behind in this new and lethal Cold War scientific race. So they violated it too. By the mid-1980s there were dozens of facilities hidden in remote corners of the Soviet Union developing and testing chemical and biological agents.

The Twelfth Department sought to recruit young, promising scientists, who would go on to lead double lives that combined scientific research and intelligence work. Some of them were prepared for infiltration to the West as scientist-illegals, according to a former Twelfth Department officer. He claimed that by the time the Soviet Union collapsed, the Twelfth Department was running ten illegals in North America, Western Europe, and South East Asia and had five more in training. They would help obtain secret information and samples from the West, delivering them to Soviet institutions for examination.[20]

When Andrei and Elena arrived in Moscow for training, they were given a two-room apartment in a nondescript apartment block in the suburbs. They never set foot in Yasenevo, ensuring that if they were caught or defected, they would have no information about the broader programme to give away. Instead, their trainers travelled to them, at a series of *konskvartiry* across Moscow, just as it had always been with illegals.

The Second Department of Directorate S, which dealt with documentation, had found Canadian identities for Andrei and Elena.

Donald Heathfield and Tracey Lee Ann Foley had been born in Canada within a couple of years of the new illegals' birth dates, and had died as infants, their gravestones found by Line N officers who were patrolling cemeteries in Canada. The plan was to send the pair to Canada first, where they would shore up their legends before eventually moving south to the Main Enemy once their cover identities, as 'Don and Ann', were well established.

Andrei and Elena's English tutor spent hours demonstrating subtle differences in mouth and tongue movement to hide a foreign accent.[21] They studied contemporary American and Canadian culture in magazines, films and songs. They planned out the contours of their future, refined their Canadian legends, and wrote a stack of letters that the KGB would mail at intervals to their parents about another imaginary life, in which they were research assistants at a Soviet scientific institute. There were also karate lessons and target practice. In their two decades of being abroad, they would never need to resort to violence, but Elena was reassured that she would be able to protect herself if necessary.

The couple took a trip to Prague by train, where they purchased a new wardrobe of imported Western clothing from the most expensive department store in town. While there, they struck up conversations with Western tourists, observing them as they talked, studying their gait, sense of dress and mannerisms. They made small talk with a few. It was an incredible psychological boost, to begin conversations with Americans and not receive quizzical looks or aggressive questions. They returned to Moscow with a suitcase of elegant clothing, better haircuts and more confidence.[22]

Toward the end of their training, Andrei and Elena were driven to a two-storey house behind a high fence in a dacha colony on the outskirts of Moscow. The interior was mocked up to resemble a real American home. The couple found a kitchen filled with appliances that looked nothing like any they had seen before, as well as a large television and a stack of French and American films on video. 'Call us if you don't understand anything here. You have a telephone – it's also imported,' their trainer said with a smile. Before leaving, he gave them a new order: they were not to speak a word of Russian, not even when alone together.

The KGB had likely wired up the house to listen in on the two young recruits, but the time in the 'American' house felt like a kind of

honeymoon for Andrei and Elena. Earlier in their training, they had often collapsed from exhaustion at the end of the long days, and sometimes they barely managed to drag themselves out of bed come morning. Now the couple walked around the house wide-eyed, gawking at the unfamiliar appliances and excited for their imaginary American life. Opening the fridge, Elena found strange foodstuffs in brightly coloured packaging. A few days later, a visitor arrived at the house, greeting them in what sounded like American-accented English. He had just arrived from North America, he said. The three of them spent a whole evening in conversation, with their guest occasionally dropping in questions about universities, streets or restaurants they would have encountered as part of their legends, to see if he could catch them out.[23]

While Andrei and Elena adapted to the unfamiliar world of Western consumer society in a safe house outside Moscow, the Soviet Union itself was embarking on a process of dramatic and unpredictable change. This transformation would eventually result in a new world at home, a place that for many Soviet citizens would be just as unfamiliar as the one across the Atlantic, with its glossy magazines and shiny food labels.

23

The End:

The Collapse of the Soviet Union

Mikhail Gorbachev took over as general secretary in 1985. At just fifty-four years old, he was a breath of fresh air after the successive rule of three ailing geriatrics – Brezhnev, Andropov and, most recently, Konstantin Chernenko, who was already sick when he assumed control and lasted just a year before he too died. During his short reign, Chernenko spoke slowly and breathed with difficulty, so much so that subordinates felt embarrassed when talking to him.[1]

Gorbachev brought much-needed vigour to the Soviet leadership, and after a cautious start he began promising a substantial change of direction. He probed opportunities for reducing tensions with the Americans, meeting with Reagan in late 1985 in Geneva and again the next year in Reykjavík. The two men gingerly moved toward a more amiable coexistence, and the imminent threat of nuclear war receded. In careful terms, Gorbachev also warned of the need for political change at home. One of his biggest demands was for more openness (glasnost), pushing back against the culture of secrecy embodied by the KGB. Large parts of Soviet society were excited by this new atmosphere, and once Gorbachev had started the process, he was unable to retain control of it. Newspapers started probing the darker pages of the past, and previously banned literature was suddenly available. ‘Our hearts demand changes,’ went the chorus of a catchy, impassioned song by the cult rock group Kino that captured the mood of the moment. In 1988, Reagan visited Moscow and gave a lecture in support of market capitalism at Moscow State University, from beneath a bust of Lenin, to a standing ovation.

Despite the new atmosphere, the spy war between the United States and the Soviet Union continued, with both sides trying ever more imaginative tricks to gain the upper hand. The CIA placed eavesdropping

devices disguised as tree branches near Soviet research installations and arranged for fake cargo transports to be shipped from Japan to Europe via the Trans-Siberian Railway, equipped with sensitive detection equipment that would register if nuclear missiles rolled past. The KGB, meanwhile, intercepted thirteen electric typewriters shipped by the Americans to Moscow and installed tiny transmitters inside them that would broadcast every typed word to a listening post outside the embassy.[2]

The biggest intelligence successes for both sides came from double agents. For the Soviets, the most devastating of these was Oleg Gordievsky, who had joined the KGB in the early 1960s as an illegals support officer. By the 1980s, when it was discovered that he had turned, he was the deputy resident in London. The Americans suffered two blows of similar magnitude. Aldrich Ames, who was responsible for Soviet counterintelligence at the CIA, offered his services to the KGB for cash, as did Robert Hanssen of the FBI. Both were handsomely rewarded and remained undetected for many years. Ames provided leads that allowed the KGB to forestall numerous CIA operations inside the Soviet Union. As a result, ten Soviets who were cooperating with the Americans were unmasked and executed. Afterwards, Kryuchkov announced their names at dinners with top officers, who were expected to applaud the news that nefarious traitors had been liquidated.[3]

The KGB was planning for war even as Gorbachev spoke of peace and reconciliation in his talks with Reagan. At Directorate S, Yuri Drozdov always had the so-called Special Period on his mind, and he was busy setting up what he hoped would become the world's most nimble special forces detachment. Impressed by the success of the Grom and Zenit battalions in Kabul, Drozdov expanded training at the Saboteurs' School into an intensive five-year programme. The resulting recruits would form a new unit called Vympel, whose existence was such a secret that even the people serving in it were not allowed to know its name. Instead, they were told they were attached to a 'Special Training Centre'. Vympel was to become a battalion of 'thinking special forces' combining the cunning of the illegal with the military training of a special forces officer. Most spoke at least one foreign language. In the event of war, small groups could be sent into enemy territory, undercover as tourists or businessmen from Western countries. Flying illegals had buried pistols and bullets in concealed spots on the outskirts of Tehran, Dakar, Beirut

and Dar es Salaam in the late 1970s. Now, as the outbreak of a hot war seemed a real possibility to the KGB leadership, Drozdov wanted to plant weapons caches across Europe and America as well. The Vympel detachments could later locate these caches and use them for acts of sabotage and terror.[4]

At the same time, training for traditional illegals continued apace. Andrei and Elena continued with their preparations, and in 1986, Directorate S dispatched two new illegals to the United States. Wolfhard and Heidi Thiel, East Germans recruited by Directorate S, arrived on Canadian passports identifying them as Bob Bohde and Karen Tully and settled in Astoria, Queens. Karen worked first as a cleaner in a photography shop and later as a secretary for a publishing company with offices in Rockefeller Center, while Bob worked as a telephone engineer for ITT and then the New York Public Library, before landing a job as a lab technician at Columbia University. Their instructions were simply to wait for activation in the event of war, when they would receive further instructions. Perhaps they would be called on to act as a support network for detachments of Drozdov's 'fighter illegals', once they had arrived behind enemy lines.[5]

Gorbachev wanted to revitalise the Soviet Union, not destroy it. 'We are traveling to a new world, the world of Communism,' he told Soviet bigwigs and Communist leaders from across the world, who assembled in the Kremlin in November 1987 to mark the seventieth anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution. 'We shall never deviate from this path.'[6] Soviet society did indeed seem to be hurtling toward a new world, but not the one of rejuvenated Leninist orthodoxy the leader had promised. As political debate, critical media and public discussion flourished, many began to question not just the crimes of the Stalinist years but the whole Soviet order. At the same time, the geopolitical situation grew ever more difficult. Falling oil prices plunged the country's struggling economy into chaos, provoking food shortages and poverty, which only exacerbated the discontent. Events in Eastern Europe were also spiralling out of Moscow's control as demands for independence grew louder across the Communist bloc.

In November 1989, crowds in East Berlin pulled down sections of the wall that had divided the city for nearly three decades, and the march

toward German unification seemed inevitable. In this atmosphere, the CIA station in East Berlin launched a door-knocking programme, visiting the homes of dozens of officers of the HVA, East Germany's foreign intelligence service, and offering them money to cooperate. They found many willing recruits.[7] Soon after, Drozdov flew to the Soviet base at Karlshorst to discuss winding down Directorate S operations in the country and destroying sensitive files on illegal cooperation between the KGB and the HVA. One of his meetings was with a young officer named Vladimir Putin, who had recently single-handedly dispersed a crowd threatening to storm the KGB building in Dresden. He had stepped outside brandishing a pistol, warning the crowds to return home. The building was heavily guarded, he urged. It was a bluff, but it worked, and the sensitive documents inside, including many files on East German illegals, were saved from public scrutiny. Now Drozdov ordered Putin to burn everything, before it was too late. There was so much to destroy that the stove in the Dresden headquarters broke down, so Putin arranged for the leftovers to be taken to a nearby Soviet military base and burned there.[8]

From New York, the East German illegals Wolfhard and Heidi Thiel followed the dramatic events in Germany and suspected that their mission might soon be coming to an end. They discussed whether they should remain in America and continue life in their cover identities or return home to Germany. In the end, they decided to leave, fearful they would otherwise never see their families again. They told American friends that they had been offered work in Europe, and in November 1990 they flew to Moscow to inform their curators that they were leaving the KGB. They feared the Soviet Union was going the same way as East Germany and the ideals they had once served no longer existed, they said. In Moscow, most shops were empty, while in Pushkin Square, a vast McDonald's had opened, and people queued for hours to spend their last roubles on the exotic taste of a Big Mac. The world had turned upside down.[9]

Kryuchkov, newly promoted to KGB chairman, was fuming. He read the Politburo a memo written by Andropov in 1977 that he had unearthed in the KGB archive. Andropov had claimed the United States was recruiting agents of influence inside the Soviet Union, plotting to bring

about the eventual collapse of the country. This was now happening, Kryuchkov told the Politburo. He reminded the leaders that it was almost exactly half a century since the German assault on the Soviet Union. Back then, Stalin had chosen not to listen to his intelligence services, and the consequences were devastating. Kryuchkov urged Gorbachev and the other Politburo members to be alert to the threat this time. At another Politburo meeting, Kryuchkov produced a copy of a coded letter sent to the Centre by Yuri Shevchenko, an illegal stationed under French cover in Western Europe. 'What is happening with our country, with my homeland? Where are we headed? Here, they are openly saying that soon there will be no Soviet Union. I am beside myself with despair,' he wrote.[10]

Kryuchkov's demands were self-interested as much as they were ideological. The bolder the Soviet people grew, the more risk the organisation itself would face. There was a real fear inside the KGB that the whole agency could be dismantled, or even attacked by angry crowds high on revolutionary fervour. At Yasenevo, the leadership rehearsed an attack on the foreign intelligence headquarters by a 'democratic' mob. Directorate S officers received machine guns and were trained to repel attacks.[11]

In a last-ditch attempt to turn back the clock, Kryuchkov and several other hard-liners in the government launched a coup against Gorbachev in August 1991. From the windows of the Directorate S offices at Yasenevo, tanks could be seen heading into the city. Drozdov, who had retired several weeks earlier, made a surprise appearance in the office, full of energy. Initially, when Kryuchkov had sounded him out on the coup, Drozdov wanted nothing to do with it, but despairing at the real sense the country was on the brink of collapse, he agreed to participate. He had spent a decade preparing for war with America, yet his final battle, when it came, was against the forces of change at home.

'We'll restore order in the country,' he shouted to his former subordinates as the tanks rumbled by. 'We'll clear up the mess!'[12]

But the coup was destined to fail. Appearing on television, the plotters seemed nervous and uncertain. Crowds converged on the White House, the seat of government, to defend it. The army leadership refused to fire on civilians and eventually withdrew from the city. The plotters were arrested and Gorbachev won out, but the real victor was the charismatic

Boris Yeltsin, a party chief from the Urals who was now president of the Russian republic within the Soviet Union, and had become an increasingly vocal Russian nationalist. Rising to the moment, he mounted a T-72 tank outside the White House and issued a stirring denunciation of the coup, a scene that became the defining image of the time.

Kryuchkov was jailed for his part in the coup, adding to the sense that decades of KGB impunity were coming to an end. He struggled to comprehend how the tables had turned so dramatically. He used his time in prison to write a self-pitying memoir that bemoaned the end of the Soviet Union. Drozdov, who avoided imprisonment, skulked back into retirement, spending his days pacing anxiously and angrily around the garden of his dacha, unable to accept that the country he had devoted his career to serving had come to an end.

To rub salt into the wounds of the hard-liners, Gorbachev appointed a reformist, Vadim Bakatin, as head of the KGB. Tall, blue-eyed and charismatic, Bakatin had been publicly disdainful of KGB operations against dissidents. He made sweeping cuts to both the domestic and the foreign arms of the KGB and looked with puzzlement at the quality of the intelligence that landed on his desk from abroad. Much of it was simply ‘informational trash that was often no more valuable than newspaper clippings’, he complained.[13]

Bakatin thought a modern spy service should focus on problems common to all humanity, notably ensuring safety from nuclear weapons. In his most controversial gesture, aimed at ushering in a new era of global peace and friendship, he alerted the Americans to a network of bugging devices placed in the country’s embassy in Moscow. Old hands at the Centre were furious at what they believed to be a combination of naïveté and idiocy. But in the new mood of openness, nobody was listening to them. On 24 October 1991, Gorbachev signed a decree that officially abolished the KGB, and Bakatin was tasked with creating a smaller agency to take its place. Foreign intelligence was to become its own, independent agency, as in most Western countries. At Yasenevo, shock and confusion reigned. For decades, illegals had received coded radio messages every week, giving them instructions and feedback. Now the radio waves went silent.

Andrei and Elena's adaptation to life in North America had been going smoothly. According to a scheme they worked out in painstaking detail in Moscow, they had travelled separately to Canada, staged a meeting, pretended to date for some time, and then married. As the rules dictated, they spoke only English to each other and avoided all talk of home even in their most private moments. The first months were for blending in. Elena made a point of observing other women as she went about her daily life. How did they dress, how did they comport themselves, how did they eat when they went to a café or restaurant? As much as she could, she tried to copy little mannerisms she spotted in others. She noticed immediately that people smiled more than they did in the Soviet Union; this casual cheeriness was something she consciously worked on during her first months in Canada.

Before long, Elena was pregnant, and in June 1990 she gave birth to her and Andrei's first child, at the Women's College Hospital in Toronto. She remembered a famous scene from the television series *Seventeen Moments of Spring*, during which a radio operator almost blows her cover while in labour, by crying out in Russian. Elena practised her composure for the big day, and Andrei arranged to be present for the birth, so he could keep an eye on her. She gave birth without any Slavic shrieking, and the pair named their newborn son Timothy, a good Canadian name with an easy Russian analogue, Timofei.

On Christmas Day 1991, Andrei and Elena checked in to a scruffy motel just outside Buffalo, New York, with the infant Tim in tow. It was the first of many trips that the new family made at Christmastime to deflect attention from the fact that it was the season when other people gathered with their extended families. It was just a ninety-minute drive to Buffalo from Toronto, along the shore of Lake Ontario, past the turn-off for Niagara Falls, and then across the border into the United States. In Buffalo, the temperature was a little below freezing, and there was a thin dusting of snow on the ground.

In the warmth of their room, Andrei and Elena tuned the small television to CNN. They watched the same image replayed again and again. Atop the dome of one of the ornate buildings inside the Kremlin's walls, a man in a white shirt pulled down the Soviet flag. In its place, the unfamiliar tricolour flag representing the new Russia was hoisted, flapping in the wind and illuminated by a floodlight. Over on ABC, the

anchor, Sam Donaldson, barely concealing a triumphal smile, hailed ‘the end of a state that, in its brief seventy-four years, murdered and oppressed its own people, enslaved other countries, and threatened the peace and the very existence of the whole world’. Live from Moscow, Ted Koppel, a correspondent who had spent much of the day in the Kremlin with Gorbachev on his last day in office, spoke of a leader who was ‘at peace with himself’ over the end of the state.

Andrei and Elena were certainly not at peace with what they saw that day as they flicked between channels in their motel room. As the evening went on, Christmas programming was interrupted to devote more airtime to the events in Moscow. President Bush flew back from his holiday at Camp David to record a special address in the Oval Office.

‘Eastern Europe is free,’ said the president. ‘The Soviet Union itself is no more. This is a victory for democracy and freedom. It’s a victory for the moral force of our values. Every American can take pride in this victory.’ He paid tribute to the courage of Gorbachev. America, he announced, had already established diplomatic relations with the new Russia, as well as with several of the newly independent Soviet successor states. ‘Our enemies have become our partners … They asked for our support, and we will give it to them,’ said Bush.

In the Buffalo motel room, Andrei Bezrukov burst into tears.[14]

In the weeks that followed, Andrei and Elena received little by way of instructions from the Centre, and it gradually dawned on them that they would be left to fend for themselves. Over the years, illegals had undergone a great deal while serving the Soviet Union: they had been arrested during the purges, ignored in the build-up to World War II, and left to untangle impossible family situations during long Cold War postings abroad. But the level of shock and confusion Andrei and Elena faced at this moment was something new. They had missed much of the drama of Gorbachev’s reforms while occupied by training exercises in KGB safe houses. Then, as they settled into their new lives in Canada, they deliberately avoided news from home. Suddenly the entire country had collapsed. Before leaving for their mission, Andrei and Elena had sworn an oath that all illegals dispatched in the 1970s and 1980s recited on departure: ‘With every beat of my heart and every day I live, I vow to serve the Party, the Motherland and the Soviet people.’[15]

Who were they meant to serve now?

Illegals across the world were in a similar position. Some decided to pack up and go home. Others rather liked the new lives they had built for themselves and chose to keep them. A decade later, the intelligence bosses of a former Soviet satellite state conducted an internal review of operations and were horrified to discover that several of the country's illegals, dispatched to the West during the 1970s and 1980s, had never returned home. In 1991, they had simply gone dark, and the agency, consumed with reorganisation, had forgotten all about them.[16]

Rather than return to Moscow, Andrei and Elena decided to get on with their cover lives and see what the future might bring. Their urgent need for financial support, and the fact that they lacked professional qualifications, meant their best option to stay afloat was to set up their own business. They thought of opening a shop, but could not raise the start-up capital they needed. Instead, Andrei had the idea that they could start a delivery business. Diapers seemed a good choice: they knew from experience that frazzled new parents would appreciate having diapers delivered to save them time and energy. They placed advertisements in local newspapers and rented a warehouse space on the outskirts of Toronto. Tim, now a toddler, enjoyed crawling over the stacks of boxes, while Andrei shuttled between rounds of deliveries. It was a prescient idea, long before the Amazon age, and soon the couple were turning a handy profit.

In 1992, Andrei won admission to Toronto's York University to study economics. York had a reputation as a more liberal alternative to the University of Toronto. Some of the faculty were full-blown Marxists, which must have been a curious experience for Andrei, a decade after his Marxist–Leninist education in Tomsk. York was also an easy place to be anonymous. Tens of thousands of undergraduate students were enrolled in the university, and in first-year economics there were three hundred students in the smallest class. It was the perfect place for a man in his late twenties, with a still-strange accent and lack of local knowledge, to get a legitimate degree without attracting too much attention.[17]

In 1994, Andrei and Elena's second son was born. They called him Alexander, another name that suited both languages. Andrei graduated in 1995 and won a place at the prestigious École des Ponts in Paris, which

took on a small cohort of international students for an English-language MBA. They packed up their Toronto apartment, sold the diaper business, and headed for Paris.

The SVR, as the country's foreign intelligence service was now called, retained its headquarters at Yasenevo. President Yeltsin chose Yevgeny Primakov, a hawkish former academic who specialised in the Middle East, to head the new agency. From the very start, Primakov pushed back against the idea that Russia should become one more second-rate power in a world of US hegemony. When Stella Rimington, the head of Britain's MI5, came to Russia in December 1991 to probe the new atmosphere of partnership, she found her supposed ally to be an iron wall. Primakov quickly shut her down when she asked whether Moscow would curtail its spying operations against Britain. 'Espionage will continue to be necessary, for the defence of Russia, and we will continue to engage in it at whatever level we choose,' he told her curtly.[18]

Despite Primakov's bravado, the mood at Yasenevo was despondent. More than a third of the SVR's staff had left the service. As a rule, those who departed were the most talented and ambitious cadres. Having knowledge of foreign languages and experience in the West, they were perfectly suited to thrive in the newly capitalist country and were quickly hired by banks and businesses as analysts or security consultants. Those who stayed at Yasenevo tended to be the older, middle-ranking officers, who struggled to adjust to the new order.

In the 1980s, Yasenevo had seemed like a luxury hotel complex, but now the building had fallen into disrepair. Chunks of marble fell from the exterior walls, and the offices stank of alcohol and tobacco. In the bathrooms, there was no toilet paper, only roughly torn squares of newspaper.[19] After complaints from the staff that the hearty cuisine served in the cafeteria had deteriorated, Primakov ordered the acquisition of two trucks, which drove to nearby farms to purchase meat and other provisions, cash in hand, from regional markets.[20] With barely enough funding to supply the office canteen, Directorate S could no longer send out packages of cash to its illegals or pay for the plane tickets to bring them home.

Some illegals remained operational, but with a carelessness that would have horrified Yuri Drozdov. In April 1992, Finnish border guards

stopped two people who had recently arrived on a plane from Moscow. Their British passports identified them as James Peatfield and Anna Nemeth, but they seemed nervous and spoke poor English. When the guards asked them who had won the British general election, which had taken place just a few days previously, they could not answer. Officers searched their bags and found $30,000 in cash and a shortwave radio.[21] It was spectacularly sloppy tradecraft. To Western policy makers, this kind of incident seemed like a farcical echo of the Cold War era. The threat from Russian espionage soon slipped down the roster of priorities, and funding for spying on Russia dropped dramatically.[22]

One legal officer, who returned to Yasenevo from abroad in 1994, was alarmed at how badly dressed many of his colleagues in the Centre were. He noted that many of them seemed to be drinking on the job.[23] Some of them had lost money in pyramid schemes and other scams in the first years of capitalism, and many once-legendary foreign intelligence officers were now trying to navigate the business world, with varying levels of success. Victor Cherkashin, the handler of the American double agent Aldrich Ames, joined a friend in an import–export company that sold everything from surplus military gas masks to cigarettes.[24] Leonid Shebarshin, the last head of foreign intelligence for the KGB, opened a consulting company with Nikolai Leonov, a veteran agent who, back in the 1950s, had worked in Cuba and befriended Raúl Castro and Che Guevara.

Yuri Drozdov, now sixty-six, founded Namakon (the ‘ma’ and ‘kon’ stood for *markyeting* and *konsalting*, two freshly imported buzzwords). The agency took on an array of projects, from performing background checks on potential Russian partners for Western businesses, to selling aircraft tyres and renting office space.[25] The venture did not get off to a good start, and Drozdov complained bitterly that his first American partners had swindled him. A brilliant intelligence warrior, Drozdov was woefully unequipped for the battlefield of capitalism.

Under Yeltsin, Russia was freer than at any other time in the country’s history, but the new world could be ruthlessly unfair and very disorientating. Foreign businessmen and local criminal gangs made fortunes, while penniless pensioners sold their few possessions on the streets. Mikhail Gorbachev appeared in a commercial for Pizza Hut. It

was hardly surprising that people like Drozdov felt unmoored as they watched on. This was a man who had posed as a Nazi to steal secrets from West Germany, who had led the assault on Amin's palace in Kabul, and who had spent a decade running the KGB's illegal operations across the globe. Now he was trying to hawk office supplies to vulgar capitalists from the Main Enemy.

Andrei and Elena arrived in Paris in the summer of 1995, with Tim and Alex in tow. The family rented a one-bedroom apartment on a pleasant block not far from the Eiffel Tower. French was the second language that Andrei and Elena had learned during their training, and they were well equipped for life in Paris, where their strange accents could be passed off as Canadian rather than Russian. Tim started at a bilingual French–English kindergarten, Elena looked after Alex, and Andrei began business school.

Lessons were held in a building off Rue des Saints-Pères in the heart of the Latin Quarter. One of Andrei's contemporaries described the course as 'more California crunchy granola than hard finance'; the marketing professor wore only white and liked to talk about 'spiritual values'. Another professor played the guitar during lectures. Andrei was in a class of sixty students who came from more than thirty different countries. There were two women from the Thai Central Bank, several wealthy European playboys, a Danish royal, and the son of the Indian ambassador to France. Some wanted to launch careers in investment banking; others were simply looking to enjoy Paris for a year.

Andrei was a few years older than most of the group and struck his fellow students as being rather pleased with himself. He gave people hearty backslaps and called everyone 'old chap'. One classmate described his manner as 'a sort of faux-British shtick' and found it tiresome. But others thought him personable and fun, and he became part of a clique of a few students who met up each Saturday, taking turns to host dinners. On one occasion, he and Elena invited the group to their flat. Although modest in size, it looked more upscale than most of the student accommodations the others were living in. Andrei talked excitedly about his diaper business in Canada.

Five contemporaries from the course all said they remembered thinking there was something odd about Don Heathfield, as Andrei was

known, but none came even close to guessing what it was. Mike Sheppard, the only ‘fellow Canadian’ that year at the École des Ponts, recalled finding Don’s accent odd, but he had met plenty of Canadians with unusual accents who had grown up in international families. The fact that Andrei could pass for a Canadian, during a year spent in close quarters with an actual Canadian, suggested the work he had done to develop his cover had been impressive.[26]

According to Elena, the couple continued to work for the SVR during this period, sending back information despite not receiving any payment. Certainly, Andrei networked aggressively, and met many people who could have been of interest to the bosses at Yasenevo. After graduating, Andrei made connections at the parent institution of the École des Ponts, the ENPC, which counted French economic attachés in embassies across the world among its graduates. He pitched a scheme to connect French businesses with potential partners in China. Soon, Andrei was arranging trips for leading French CEOs. ‘The Rolodex he would have picked up on those trips is quite something to think about,’ remarked someone who was involved. When, fifteen years later, French intelligence officers came knocking at the École des Ponts, they were horrified to learn about these visits to China. They came back for several follow-up interviews, trying to work out if any of the participants had been compromised on the visits.

On the face of it, Andrei’s year in Paris was a glorious espionage success. However, one anecdote from the time sheds a different light on the period. Among the numerous visiting professors at the École des Ponts that year was a Russian academic who taught a class on economic changes in former Soviet countries. At the end of one of these seminars, a fellow student recalled later, Andrei approached the instructor and started speaking Russian. It was only a short conversation, but it surprised everyone in the room.

‘I didn’t know you spoke Russian,’ said one of the other students.

‘Ah, well, I have various skills,’ Andrei replied, with a mysterious smile. The topic was never mentioned again.[27]

Speaking Russian in public was one of the most self-destructive things an illegal could do. Illegal couples were not even supposed to whisper in Russian to each other in bed. The fact that Andrei treated his Russian fluency as a party trick rather than something to be concealed suggests that he might not have been imagining a future as an undercover

operative. Perhaps, like many other illegals, Andrei and Elena had decided to live peacefully in their cover identities. Now that Russia and the United States were supposedly allies, they might have imagined a different future for the family as ordinary, successful Canadians.

If that is indeed what they decided, some years later they would reconsider. As the decade drew to a close, Russia was entering a new era under a new leader, a man who had spent years working as an illegals support officer for the KGB. He promised to restore the prestige and the funding of the intelligence services and to avenge the humiliations of the 1990s.

24

Stierlitz Takes Over:

The Rise of Vladimir Putin

Yeltsin won a second term in a 1996 election, thanks to the support of the new business and political elite, who were fearful of allowing resurgent Communists back into power. His health continued to decline, and on the eve of the new millennium he gave an unexpected television address. His speech was slurred and his expression grave as he told the Russian people that he was stepping down as president. ‘I am asking for your forgiveness for failing to justify the hopes of those who believed me when I said we would leap from the grey, stagnating totalitarian past into a bright, prosperous, and civilized future. I believed in that dream. I believed we would cover that distance in one leap. We didn’t.’[1]

Yeltsin announced his successor: a man named Vladimir Putin. At the start of the 1990s, Putin had been a lowly KGB case officer, stationed in the relative isolation of Dresden as the Communist bloc collapsed. His upward trajectory began soon after his return to the Soviet Union. He left the KGB and worked as an aide to the new, liberal mayor of St Petersburg, Anatoly Sobchak. In 1996, Sobchak lost his re-election bid, and Putin was called to Moscow to work in the presidential administration. Two years later, he was appointed to run the FSB, as the domestic arm of the former KGB was now called. It was a meteoric rise, from provincial cog to the director’s office in Lubyanka, in just eight years. The next year, Yeltsin made him prime minister and a few months later nominated him as acting president.

Putin was seen as a weak candidate who would protect the interests of the powerful groups that supported Yeltsin. One high-level banker described him as being ‘as obedient as a dog’.[2] Still, there were early signs that he was made of steelier stuff than his detractors believed. Putin’s KGB background was a key part of his public image. He made his first ever television appearance in 1992 ‘in character’ as Stierlitz, the

illegal who goes undercover as a Nazi in *Seventeen Moments of Spring*. In a television documentary about the St Petersburg administration, film producers played the theme song of the series to images of Putin driving his Volga through the city's streets.[3]

Stierlitz, the disciplined and ascetic patriot, was a popular figure of nostalgia during the chaos of the 1990s, and endless repeats of *Seventeen Moments* on Russian television kept him alive in the cultural imagination. In May 1999, a survey organised by the weekly magazine *Kommersant-Vlast* found that Stierlitz was Russia's favourite hero. He was featured on the cover of one of its issues, with the caption 'President 2000'. A few months later, Yeltsin appointed Putin as his prime minister. Gradually, the Kremlin's spin doctors portrayed Putin as the Stierlitz that people craved. The quiet, no-nonsense man from the KGB would be the steady hand the country needed after years of turbulence and decay.[4]

The Russian public never learned much detail about their new president's KGB years. Per Putin's own recollections, he received a phone call, during his fourth year of university, from a man who wanted to discuss his 'career assignment'. After passing background checks, he studied at a training academy in Leningrad and was assigned to a job in the KGB's counterintelligence department. He told his friends he was a policeman. His future wife, Lyudmila, only found out he worked for the KGB eighteen months into their relationship when a friend told her.[5]

It is possible that Putin was briefly a trainee illegal, given his excellent German and the wall of secrecy that surrounds his time with the KGB. His wife was also fluent in German and Spanish, suggesting they could have been considered for a life abroad as an illegal couple. It is certainly probable that someone from the Third Department of Directorate S, which kept an eye out for potential illegal recruits, had Putin monitored. But it was not to be. Putin was instead sent to crack down on political dissent. In 1976, the twenty-three-year-old Lieutenant Putin took part in arresting two dissidents who hung a huge banner in St Petersburg that read, 'The human soul knows no chains.' The pair received lengthy jail terms.[6]

Later, Putin ended up part of a six-man KGB team in the East German city of Dresden. A colleague from the time recalled that most of his work involved the most menial stage of illegal recruitment, sifting through

details of thousands of promising East Germans and looking for potential candidates for the training programme. Directorate S employed hundreds of similar spotters. ‘He worked without any illusions that his candidates would make it to the finish line,’ Putin’s colleague claimed.[7] Putin was also in charge of the Dresden office’s work on Operation RYAN, the KGB’s global programme to monitor for signs of an impending US nuclear strike. For Putin, this tedious work involved checking lists of visitors from West Germany, to see if any came from towns where there were American army bases.[8]

When the East German regime disintegrated, Putin left the country along with the other KGB officers stationed there. He took with him a twenty-one-year-old washing machine donated by neighbours, a small stack of savings in US dollars, and a gnawing bitterness at how the superpower he had served had crumbled before his eyes.[9] Less than a decade later, he was president of the new Russia, with a burning desire to right the wrong of the Soviet collapse. He wanted Russia to be a ‘first-tier nation’, as he put it in a newspaper article he authored in 1999, a status he felt the country was at risk of losing. Initially, he entertained the thought that the restoration of Russian prestige could be possible through cooperation, a new era of warm relations with the West. He suggested that perhaps, one day, Russia might even join NATO.

Many Western leaders saw in Putin the seeds of a potential reformer. ‘His vision of the future is one that we would feel comfortable with,’ said the British prime minister, Tony Blair, who made two trips to Russia in 2000. The next year, President George W. Bush memorably claimed, after his first meeting with Putin, that he was ‘able to get a sense of his soul’. But some former dissidents were wary of the new president from the beginning: his sarcastic smirk, his crude language and his KGB demeanour sent shivers down their spines.

A few days before Yeltsin stood down, on 20 December 1999, Putin visited Lubyanka to address his former colleagues at the FSB, on the anniversary of the founding of the Cheka in 1917. ‘I would like to announce that the group of FSB agents that you sent to work undercover in the government has accomplished the first part of its mission,’ he told the assembled officers. It was a joke, but not entirely. Putin installed his old colleagues from the KGB in key political and economic roles.

Nikolai Patrushev, who succeeded Putin as head of the FSB, described the agency's employees as Russia's 'new nobility'.[10]

Around this time, a retired CIA agent visited Moscow on a nostalgia trip. He wanted to sit down with Yuri Drozdov for a friendly meal that would have been unthinkable a decade previously. At dinner, the man from the CIA made a comment, supposedly in passing, that one day, when the archives opened, Russians would be shocked to discover the high-level sources the CIA had run in Moscow during the late Soviet period. Maybe this man genuinely knew something, or maybe he wanted to play one last game of cat and mouse with his old adversary. But Drozdov could not get the words out of his mind.[11] In time, he came to believe they held a truth that he had long suspected: the Soviet regime fell because of the treachery and betrayal of the political elite. For men like Drozdov, the Soviet collapse was not the juddering end of a broken system, but a great nation ruined by the perfidy of the West and its traitorous domestic accomplices. Putin was of a different generation and thought Russia had a lot to learn from the West. Nonetheless, he had been brought up to believe the United States was the Main Enemy and considered it naïve to think that had changed entirely.

Some months before Putin entered the Kremlin, Andrei and Elena left Paris for the United States together with their sons, Tim and Alex, now nine and five. Andrei had won a place at Harvard's Kennedy School. In the summer of 1999, the family flew to Toronto, picked up some possessions from storage, and then drove to Boston. They stayed in a hotel for a few days, before renting an apartment on Leonard Avenue, in a residential area of Cambridge. Tim and Alex enrolled in Boston's lycée, a bilingual French–English school that Andrei and Elena hoped would protect their children from propaganda about American patriotism and exceptionalism.

For decades, illegals in America had struggled to attain educational success, the key to penetrating influential circles in Washington. Now Andrei was perfectly placed. His Kennedy School cohort was split roughly equally between Americans and foreigners. Many already had promising careers in government and business, and they were likely to rise further in the coming years. During induction week, the students told

the group a little bit about their backgrounds and where they saw themselves in ten years. Felipe Calderón, a young Mexican politician, said he expected to be his country's president by then, a plan he would successfully execute. Mao Xiaofeng, a rising star of the Chinese Communist Party, liked to impress the group by telling them that as a secretary for the Communist Youth League he had already been responsible for the lives of millions of people.[12] There were several who explained their governmental backgrounds in suspiciously vague terms, and it is unlikely that Andrei was the only spy in that year's intake. There were two other Russians among the group, but Andrei avoided them as best as he could. Elena Chesheva, an economist who went on to work for the World Bank, recalled exchanging a few words with him during the first week. She didn't see much of him after that.

Andrei told people he was from Montreal, was the son of a Canadian diplomat, and had grown up in different countries, attending international schools. He was hazy on the specifics, but the general story explained his residual accent and odd verbal tics. He dispelled any doubts with oodles of self-confidence. He had a habit of tilting his head as he spoke, an intense look in his dark hazel eyes, and he liked to share his opinions on the topics of the day. But he also knew how to have fun, and often suggested evenings out at Cambridge bars. Over Easter weekend, Andrei arranged with three other Canadians in the course to host a Scotch-tasting event at all four of their houses. He chose the Scotches, and the event ended back at his place in the early hours of the morning.[13] He networked relentlessly, offering his Don Heathfield business cards to anyone who would take them and demanding people's contacts in return. Elsewhere, this kind of behaviour might have been cause for suspicion; at Harvard it was par for the course.

After graduating, Andrei joined a Cambridge-based consultancy firm called Global Partners. The company offered future forecasting services for businesses, couched in just the kind of vague management-speak that Don Heathfield liked to use. It impressed some people and left others suspecting he was talking nonsense. His résumé described his strength as 'business relationship building'.

It is hard to say exactly when Andrei and Elena resumed their active espionage careers, but the fact that Andrei avoided the Russians in his year at Harvard suggests the couple had abandoned any ideas about going

dark and fully embracing their new lives as Don and Ann. By 2000, they were in regular contact with the SVR, receiving weekly coded messages by shortwave radio, just as before. Elena was responsible for decoding them, transcribing the sets of five numbers – and then using her onetime decryption pad to work out the instructions.[14]

Financial support from the Centre also returned. On one occasion, Andrei and Elena received $64,500 to cover rent and expenses, a handsome sum given Andrei was also earning a decent salary. The clunky shortwave radio transmissions, which took hours to decrypt, were soon replaced by a new method known as steganography. Coded messages were hidden inside innocent-looking images posted online. These could then be downloaded and decrypted, giving the illegals a way of getting speedy messages back to the Centre. No longer did they need to use dead drops or write letters in invisible ink that could take weeks or months to reach Moscow.

For all that everything had changed, it had also stayed the same. The tasks Andrei and Elena received from the SVR were similar to those given to their Soviet-era predecessors: they were to provide a steady flow of personality reports on people who might later be useful targets for a recruitment pitch or for blackmail, and they were also asked for analytical dossiers on political matters of interest. Andrei's time at Harvard and subsequent consultancy career had proved excellent for cultivating high-level contacts, and he and Elena could afford to feel proud of the life they had built, having succeeded at integrating into the American elites where so many previous illegals had failed.

Unfortunately for the couple, all their work was doomed from the start. There were only a few people in the SVR who were authorised to know any details about the illegals undercover in the United States: the highest levels of management, and a handful of direct case officers and handlers. Most of them would only know Andrei and Elena by their code names. The file that laid out the details of their American names, where they lived, and where they worked was locked away behind multiple levels of security at Yasenevo and could be accessed by a grand total of three people. The problem for Andrei and Elena was that one of those three was working for the Americans.

Alexander Poteyev arrived in New York in 1995 as an accredited Russian diplomat posted to the country's UN mission, headed at the time by the future foreign minister Sergei Lavrov. Poteyev almost certainly lived in the shabby compound in Riverdale, in the Bronx, which had passed from Soviet to Russian diplomatic use, and commuted each day to the Russian UN mission in midtown, also inherited from the Soviets. Poteyev took the lift to the eighth floor of the building each morning, where he opened an unmarked steel door by touching a piece of metal against a brass plate mounted to one side. This completed an electric circuit, and the bolt sprang open. Inside, Poteyev left his coat and electronics in a locker and punched in a code to get through another steel door, which led him into an area known as the submarine. The walls were several inches thick and hummed with white noise from a spaghetti of wires that ran through them to block out any attempts by the FBI to listen in. There were no windows, no telephone lines, and the computers were not connected to the internet. This was the SVR's residency in New York. Each of the SVR's departments had its own office inside, and most of the names had remained unchanged since the KGB era: Line PR for political, Line X for scientific, Line ER for economic, Line VKR for counterintelligence, and Line OT for technical operations. Each morning, Poteyev passed a secretary who kept an eye on everyone who came and went, and walked straight on until he reached an office at the end of the corridor: Line N, illegals support.[15]

Poteyev had been born into a military family; his father was decorated with the Hero of the Soviet Union order for service in World War II as a tank commander. The younger Poteyev enlisted in the army and then the KGB in the late 1970s, serving in one of the Directorate S battalions that were sent to Kabul around the time of the Soviet invasion. He was recommended for study at the KGB's Red Banner Institute, where recruits received training before being dispatched overseas as legal officers. Poteyev stayed with the service during the Soviet collapse, and in 1995 he was rewarded with a prize posting in New York.

When he first arrived, Poteyev had little to do. Many illegals had gone dark following the Soviet Union's collapse, and there was minimal active espionage to manage. Andrei and Elena were still in Paris, but there was at least one illegal operating in the New York area. Mikhail Vasenkov was one of the most experienced illegals still out in the field; he lived

under the cover of a Peruvian writer and graduate student. He had arrived in Lima in 1976, claiming to be a Uruguayan citizen named Juan Lazaro. He had fled repression in Uruguay seven years previously, he said, and spent the intervening years in Barcelona, where he had picked up work for a Spanish tobacco company. Many of those he met thought his Spanish sounded weird, but nobody guessed the reason why. He settled in Lima, where he studied journalism, photography and martial arts. Before long, he made a name for himself as a skilled news photographer and was naturalised as a Peruvian citizen.[16]

The Centre granted Vasenkov permission to marry a woman named Vicky Peláez, a leftist Peruvian journalist who presented segments on *90 Seconds*, the country's most popular television programme. It is not clear how much Peláez knew about her new husband: when they were arrested decades later, she insisted that during all their years of marriage she had no idea he was really a Russian spy. An archival document from 1983 suggests that Vasenkov recruited Peláez 'using a false flag', although it did not specify what country or organisation he claimed to represent.[17] Peláez certainly knew he was up to something, but it seems she did not know he was a Soviet spy and a Soviet citizen.

The Line N operatives in Lima helped Vasenkov to lay the groundwork for his infiltration of the Main Enemy, and in the early 1980s he and Peláez made the move, settling in Yonkers.[18] Peláez wrote fiery leftist columns for a Spanish-language newspaper, while Vasenkov enrolled at the New School and worked on his master's thesis, followed by a doctorate. In 1993, the couple's son, Juan Jr., was born. Like most illegals at the time, Vasenkov probably did very little in the way of intelligence work, but he might have received instructions or cash from Poteyev via dead drops.

Security rules at the SVR residency were less strict than during the Soviet period, and Poteyev was free to explore New York with his wife, which gave the FBI time to study his movements and habits.[19] At some point, probably just before he left the United States in 1999, the FBI approached him. FBI and CIA sources hint that the Russian ended up turning for a combination of reasons. Part of it was his disillusionment with the dysfunction of the SVR in the 1990s, but there was also the appealing prospect of money and a life in the United States for his

family. His daughter Margarita had obtained a law degree in Moscow and later won a place to study for a master's degree at Eastern Kentucky University. During the Soviet period, it would have been unthinkable that the child of a KGB officer could live inside the Main Enemy. In the Putin era, the SVR would resume checks on the relatives of high-ranking employees and ban unauthorised foreign travel. But back in the late 1990s, nobody paid much attention. Margarita stayed on in the United States, eventually getting her PhD in criminology from the University of Delaware.[20] It is not clear if she was involved in the FBI approach to Poteyev, but providing opportunities for family members in the United States was a tactic the bureau used to exert pressure on targets. Either way, by the time Poteyev returned to Moscow in 1999 to work at SVR headquarters in Yasenevo, he had agreed to collude with the FBI.

In time, Poteyev was named deputy head of the department that oversaw all illegals working in North and South America, giving him full access to the files of Andrei and Elena, Vasenkov, and everyone else the SVR was running inside the United States. It was too dangerous for the Americans to remain in contact with Poteyev while he was in Moscow, so the CIA waited for him to take work trips abroad. When he flew to Latin American countries on business, his handlers did the same. Disguised, they would check into the same hotel and meet him there quietly.[21]

By the autumn of 2000, a year after Andrei and Elena arrived in the United States, Poteyev's information had put the FBI onto them.[22] A huge team was put in place to monitor every aspect of the couple's lives. Agents sifted through Andrei and Elena's trash, tapped their phones, and followed them around Cambridge. One evening every week, an FBI agent would stroll past their building on Leonard Avenue, eyeing which lights were turned on in their apartment. Meanwhile, another agent sat in a Dodge Intrepid parked nearby, clutching a shortwave radio and listening in to the same coded broadcasts that Elena was transcribing inside. An FBI team broke into the family's home while they were away; they conducted a search and installed bugs. When Andrei and Elena brought their car to a garage for maintenance, the FBI planted a bug there too. All this was done with extreme caution: the couple were trained to

watch for unusual activity, and they would have fled immediately at the first sign of surveillance.

On a quiet Tuesday night in January 2001, the FBI agents running Andrei and Elena's case descended into the vault of a local bank. They examined the lock of a safe-deposit box and cut a new key on the spot. Inside the box, they found a birth certificate for Donald Heathfield, some other family papers, a stack of cash, and a set of photographic negatives, which, when held up to the light, appeared to show a young woman of about twenty in various wooded settings. The FBI photographed everything, replaced it with painstaking care, and returned to the Boston field office.

At first glance, the box did not contain anything obviously incriminating. Important documents, valuables and some personal mementos from the past were exactly the sorts of items a normal family might keep locked away. It was only much later that the FBI discovered that the real Donald Heathfield, son of Howard and Shirley Heathfield of Burlington, Ontario, had died as an infant, proving that the man now calling himself Don Heathfield had appropriated the identity. But the photographs of Ann Foley contained a more immediate clue. The greenery in the background could have been anywhere, but there was one thing that stood out. On the bottom edges of each of the negatives, a small area of film had been cut out at regular intervals. Just one of the negatives had been left unsnipped. There was a word on it, printed in tiny letters: TACMA. None of the FBI agents knew what this meant, and research did not uncover anything. But then someone posited the idea that the letters could be Cyrillic. In Russian, the word read TASMA, which they quickly realised was one of the main producers of film in the Soviet Union.

Elena had broken the rule that illegals should never leave for the West with any item that could link them to the Soviet Union, however small. Perhaps she had somehow retrieved the negatives from Russia during the 1990s, when the couple had considered leaving intelligence work. Starting a new life as Ann Foley, maybe Elena wanted to bring one small reminder of her former life. Buried in a safe to which only she had the key, deep inside a secure bank vault, the negatives must have seemed safe from any prying eyes. But those five letters were the undoing of all the years of training, the careful subterfuge, and the lies they spun even to

their own children. Poteyev's tip-off had been right. The FBI had found their smoking gun.[23]

Nine months later, Elena arrived home one morning after dropping Tim and Alex at school and visiting the gym. The telephone rang. It was Andrei, calling from Paris, where he was away on a consultancy trip. He told her to switch on the television immediately. She did and saw footage, replaying on a loop on CNN, of the twin towers of the World Trade Center collapsing, hit by two planes that had taken off from nearby Logan Airport that morning. When she went to pick up Tim and Alex that afternoon, there was a sombre yet tense atmosphere among the parents at the school's gates. When Andrei returned home a few days later, the couple discussed what the attacks might change, both for their security as North Americans and for their work as Russian spies.[24]

The agents from the FBI's Boston field office who had been tracking Andrei and Elena were hastily reassigned to deal with the aftermath of a day that would irrevocably alter America and the world. At CIA headquarters, when it became clear that hijacked planes were targeting government buildings, the leadership had to decide whether to keep working or evacuate the building. During the Cold War, the agency had maintained a secret alternate campus in a bunker, to which its leaders could retreat in the event of a nuclear war, but it had been mothballed in the 1990s. No one thought it would be necessary in a post-Cold War world.[25]

The 9/11 attacks suggested these assumptions had been complacent, but they also reinforced the idea that America's true enemies were no longer in Moscow. Putin sensed that the world's geopolitical tectonic plates were shifting and spotted an opportunity. He told President Bush that Russia did not have qualms about America using air bases in the former Soviet republics of Central Asia for its upcoming assault on Afghanistan. Putin imagined this could be the beginning of a new grand bargain between Moscow and Washington, and some Americans agreed. Two days after the attacks, the CIA director, George Tenet, called on the agency's Russia team. 'We just briefed President Bush, and one of the things we told him is that Russia is going to be a very important ally,' he told them.

Tenet asked for thoughts on the most fruitful areas of potential cooperation with Russia and was met with disbelief. The former KGB officers now in charge could not be trusted, the CIA's Russia team told him. One senior CIA man present that day had been posted to Helsinki in the late 1980s, where his KGB opposite number was a suave young officer called Sergei Ivanov. The pair struck up a friendship, and even visited each other's homes for dinners, but it transpired that Ivanov had used one of these dinners to spray his American opposite number with an odourless, colourless dust marked with a special chemical tag. The KGB would then screen the belongings and clothes of Soviet diplomats for traces of the tag, and anyone who came back positive would be suspected of traitorous contact with the CIA. Ivanov was now Putin's defence minister, one of many former KGB officers running the country. In the CIA's Russia team, there was deep scepticism that Moscow could ever be a true ally while these people were in charge.[26] But Tenet and the CIA's leadership dismissed these concerns; all energies were to be redirected toward the so-called War on Terror, in which Russia was to be an important ally. Within a week, a delegation of senior CIA officials was bound for Moscow, where they had dinner with SVR bigwigs in a mansion belonging to the spy agency in the city centre and grudgingly discussed possible areas of collaboration.

In many ways, the difficulties that American agencies faced against Islamist extremism were similar to those they had encountered trying to sniff out Russian illegals during the Cold War. Nineteen terrorists had been able to live undetected in America as they planned the 9/11 attacks. How many more might be out there? In the subsequent years, numerous television series aired in which happy and apparently well-integrated Muslim characters were exposed as evil terrorists. The paranoia was not unlike the obsession with Russian illegals after the Abel trial back in the late 1950s and the fear that anyone could be a Soviet illegal, hiding behind ordinary American identities. Islamist terrorism was now the main concern for both the American political elite and society at large. It would be fifteen years before many would again start to see Russian espionage as an equally alarming threat to American democracy.

25

Operation Ghost Stories:

The FBI Swoops

By 2004, when Putin won a second term in office, the contours of a new and assertive Russia were already forming. The overtures to the West that had characterised his early time in office were in the past. That year, he ordered the SVR to begin more intensive intelligence operations against Western nations, which included a major reinvestment in the work of its US-based illegals. If Andrei and Elena had felt superfluous during the 1990s, there was no question now that the SVR valued them.

Poteyev kept the Americans updated on Directorate S activities in the United States. Despite the FBI's reduced budget for work on Russia, a small team kept track of Andrei and Elena over the next few years, listening in to their conversations and sifting through the family trash. The FBI also bugged the Yonkers home of Mikhail Vasenkov and his Peruvian wife, Vicky Peláez, though they found the work of the longest-serving illegal in the United States distinctly unimpressive. In 2002, the bug picked up Vasenkov complaining that the SVR was not happy with the intelligence he was providing. In 2004, he officially retired, apparently preferring to live the remainder of his life in his cover identity rather than return to Russia. The only operation he carried out thereafter was to pick up cash from a handler once a year.[1]

Poteyev also had some surprising news to share with the FBI: the arrival of new illegals who had been trained in the chaotic years after the Soviet collapse. The FBI immediately noticed lapses in tradecraft that suggested they had not had the same rigorous preparation as their Soviet-trained predecessors. Cynthia Hopkins and Richard Murphy, who were really Lidiya and Vladimir Guryev, claimed to be born-and-bred Americans. In 2003, they moved into a small apartment in Hoboken, New Jersey, together with their two young daughters. Their neighbours didn't notice anything suspicious about the family.[2] But, in a bizarre

coincidence, when Richard Murphy enrolled in a degree course at the New School in New York, his academic supervisor turned out to be Nina Khrushcheva, the granddaughter of Nikita Khrushchev. She taught Murphy a class on media and international affairs. He wrote essays in poor English lambasting Western media outlets for their biased interpretations of world events, and Khrushcheva immediately saw through his charade. 'The dude was so obviously Russian. His accent, his manner: it was like talking to Boris Yeltsin,' she recalled years later.

A savvier illegal would have run a mile from a compatriot like Khrushcheva, but Murphy frequently showed up at her office to complain about the course, the university and life in general. 'I was puzzled by the Richard Murphy name, but this is America, there are privacy concerns, and to be honest he was so annoying that I just wanted him to leave my office,' she said. Eventually, her curiosity got the better of her and she asked her student why he was called Richard Murphy when he was so clearly Russian. 'I'm from Philadelphia; I just had a Russian nanny when I was growing up,' he replied.[3]

Life as an illegal was tough for Richard Murphy. As per the long-standing tradition, the Centre assumed the male partner would be the main intelligence operative, while his wife would take a supporting role and manage communications with the Centre. But the eavesdroppers from the FBI quickly realised that Cynthia was much better at the job than her husband. Their bug picked up Cynthia berating him for his incompetence, and the FBI started to suspect Richard was suffering from depression. Sometimes, she called home to ask for help running errands, and he would tell her irritably that he was busy and hang up. Then the FBI listened as he sat down on the couch and turned on *The Sopranos*.[4]

In May 2005, an FBI team searched Richard and Cynthia's Hoboken apartment while they were out. Inside a shoebox, they found floppy disks, a small piece of paper with 'alt-control-e' written on it, and a twenty-seven-character password. It did not take the FBI operatives long to put the puzzle together. The FBI cloned the computer's hard drive and found a list of websites where the illegals uploaded encrypted messages hidden inside innocent-looking images. The bureau was now able to decrypt earlier messages to and from the Centre and keep abreast of new ones. Electronic communications, as convenient as they were, were no match for old-school methods when it came to security. Still, leaving the

disk out, with the password and instructions on how to enter it, was shockingly poor tradecraft.

In Boston, Andrei and Elena were building an impressive American life, unaware that their every move was under FBI surveillance. Andrei's consultancy career was taking off, and he began to travel more for work, while Elena spent more time at home helping the children with their homework, driving them to sports practice, and making small talk with other parents. In 2006, Andrei left Global Partners to set up his own company, Future Map Strategic Advisory Services, which he ran from home. He sent reports back to Moscow about everyone he met that might be of interest. The Centre told him which people to focus on and created code names for each target. One note from 2007 read as follows: 'Got your note and signal. No info in our files about E.F., BT, DK, RR. Agree with your proposal to use "Farmer" to start building network of students in DC. Your relationship with "Parrot" looks very promising as a valid source of info from US power circles. To start working on him professionally we need all available details on his background, current position, habits, contacts, opportunities, etc.'

Now that the FBI could read the messages sent by the illegals, they were able to keep a close watch on the people Andrei was monitoring. Occasionally, if they felt he was getting close to something potentially damaging, they stepped in to remove the person carefully from his orbit. The bureau listened in on every one of Andrei's calls, as well as on his private arguments and most intimate moments with Elena. They knew all about the family's application for naturalisation in 2008, watching but not intervening as the family was granted US citizenship.

Home life, at least in Elena's later recollections, was peaceful. As Tim and Alex grew older, they became close. Tim's babyish features, together with his brother's serious demeanour, blurred the four-year age gap between them. Andrei and Elena disagreed sometimes on how best to raise the kids. Elena wanted to be a caring and supportive parent, aware that the children had precious little else by way of family support, while Andrei felt that letting them fend for themselves would aid their emotional development. But they rarely argued over household chores or other more mundane matters. 'Maintaining a relationship is easy when people are not just a romantic couple but when they have a common

task,' Elena later said. 'People start having fights when they take insignificant things, dwell on them, and try to change the other person. We never did that.'[5]

The internet made it much easier to keep up with news from Russia, but Andrei and Elena tried to avoid doing anything that could link them with their homeland. Andrei liked to discuss world events with his sons, but out of an abundance of caution he avoided talking about Russia. They never ate Russian food at home, although once Elena made miniature dumplings very much like the traditional Russian pelmeni and passed them off as tortellini. And Russian was never spoken, save for the occasional phrase that boomed from the computer when Tim and Alex played *Call of Duty* – something that shook their parents to the core the first time they heard it. At Christmastime, Andrei and Elena looked for two sets of gifts for Tim and Alex: one from themselves and another they could wrap and claim had arrived in the mail from their grandparents, who supposedly lived in a faraway part of Alberta, much too remote to visit. Sometimes, they showed Tim and Alex photographs of their real grandparents, passing the snowy Siberian landscapes off as remote Canada.[6]

Contact with the Centre came on occasional trips to South America, where Elena met with Line N officers posted under diplomatic cover. In one of these meetings, she met an officer who brought letters from her family in Tomsk, which she was to burn after reading. He also brought her herring and dark Russian bread, to give her a fleeting reminder of home.[7] When she returned from such trips, she told the children she had been visiting Canada, making up a mundane reason for the trip. At the Boston lycée, Alex was surrounded by people who seemed to have glamorous, jet-setting families. The lives of his parents seemed very dull in comparison.

Poteyev was able to keep the FBI one step ahead of Directorate S, and the information he provided meant Operation Ghost Stories, as the FBI's monitoring of the illegals was called, was constantly expanding. He told them about yet more arrivals: Michael Zotolli and Patricia Mills, whose real names were Mikhail Kutsik and Natalia Pereverzeva, came separately in 2001 and 2003, married in 2005, and settled in Seattle. Like Richard and Cynthia, their cover stories left a lot to be desired. Zotolli

said he was born in Yonkers and had spent his childhood in Taiwan; Mills said she was Canadian. Both had obviously Slavic accents.

Poteyev also alerted the Americans to Pavel Kapustin, who travelled on short-term trips to the United States under the Canadian identity of Christopher Metsos. Kapustin disbursed cash and advice and was a human face for the illegals, whose usual contact with their handlers was only via coded messages. Elena and Andrei met him in Canada, where they could easily find an excuse to travel and where they felt less likely to come to the attention of the FBI.

Finally, Poteyev revealed that Directorate S had started to make use of a new kind of illegal: Russians with promising profiles who were given rudimentary training in the basics of tradecraft. These new illegals used their real names and their genuine Russian passports. Borders had opened in the years since the Soviet Union's collapse, and there were hundreds of thousands of Russian scientists, businesspeople and travellers all over the world. The vast majority had no links to the intelligence services, which made it easy for the SVR to slip a few people into the West who did.

The most successful of these new illegals was Anna Chapman, a charismatic redhead whose father had been the SVR's legal resident in Zimbabwe. She had a well-calibrated mix of studied naïveté and suggestive sensuality that certain men found irresistible. In New York, she ran a real estate website aimed at helping rich Russians find property. She handed out business cards with 'Explore Your Possibilities' written on them, and she flirted her way around Manhattan parties. She was a more natural networker than any of the fully trained illegals, and she made numerous contacts in the financial world that would have been of interest to the SVR. The fact that she was open about being Russian didn't matter. In the 1980s, an influential American man meeting a beautiful woman recently arrived from Moscow would immediately suspect she was with the KGB. In the post-Cold War world, Anna was just another ambitious young woman in New York, having fun and trying to get rich quick.

Every week, Anna sat in a café and turned on her laptop. Outside, a white van carrying a Line N employee with his own laptop would drive slowly past. The two computers linked up over a private network – a clever way of transmitting information, and almost impossible for outsiders to detect. Luckily for the FBI, Poteyev was updating them on

the SVR's latest tricks. If not for him, real-name illegals like Anna could have caused huge damage to national security.

As rising oil prices fuelled an economic boom, Moscow transformed into a city of expensive cars, fancy restaurants, and luxury shopping malls. At the same time, the stand-off with the West intensified. In 2006, Moscow's agents assassinated a renegade FSB officer, Alexander Litvinenko, in London, using radioactive polonium. The attack was a sign both of Putin's disdain for those he regarded as traitors and of his willingness to carry out brazen attacks on foreign soil. The next year, he gave an angry speech at the Munich Security Conference, berating American global dominance in starker terms than ever before. The Kremlin increased funding to all three Russian intelligence agencies – the SVR, the FSB and the GRU, military intelligence.

Putin and the head of the FSB, Nikolai Patrushev, were convinced that foreign intelligence services were recruiting inside Russia to destabilise the country. In 2007, Patrushev claimed that over the previous four years, the agency had uncovered more than 270 active officers and 70 foreign agents operating in Russia.[8] This spy-mania may have been vastly exaggerated but it was not entirely invented. After all, Alexander Poteyev was still working undetected in the very heart of the SVR, passing secrets back to Washington. In 2006, the former GRU officer Sergei Skripal was sentenced to thirteen years in prison on charges of spying for MI6. The same year, Russian television broadcast a sensational story about a 'fake rock' that MI6 had supposedly placed in a Moscow park. The FSB alleged that the rock concealed a small computer and transmitter, allowing Russian recruits to walk past it without drawing attention and transfer data to the rock, which could later be retrieved by MI6 handlers. At the time, many dismissed the rock story as propaganda. It turned out to be real.[9]

Life for Alexander Poteyev was one long endurance test. Year after year, he commuted from his apartment in the Moscow suburbs to the SVR's headquarters at Yasenevo, all the while keeping his secret to himself. When illegals made their occasional trips back to Moscow, Poteyev drove to a *konskvartira* to debrief them, just as Directorate S handlers had done for decades. As he went about his work, he knew he was always a moment away from potential downfall. The Russians could

recruit someone inside the FBI or CIA who knew about the double agent in the SVR, setting off a mole hunt at Yasenevo. The SVR's counterintelligence department could find something suspicious in his travels or movements, or instigate a routine check on him. Alternatively, the Americans could act too hastily on one of his many tip-offs, which might alert the SVR to the possibility of a leak. This came close to happening in 2008, when Herman Simm, an Estonian security officer delegated to NATO, was arrested in Tallinn and accused of being a long-standing SVR collaborator. Simm had handed over thousands of pages of top-secret NATO documents to a Portuguese businessman who turned out to be one of the SVR's flying illegals. NATO intelligence assessed that the damage caused by Simm was enormous. It was a sign of how, even in the modern age, illegals who flew out on short missions to handle agents or assets could be useful. These operatives were given higher-risk tasks than long-term illegals like Andrei and Elena, for whom the priority was avoiding detection.

Poteyev had tipped off his handlers with information that allowed them to home in on Simm. Ordinarily, the FBI and CIA would not act immediately on Poteyev's tips: it was safer to monitor the damage without raising suspicions about a leak. But Simm was too dangerous. Realising how serious the security breach was to NATO, the Americans shared Poteyev's information with Tallinn, disguising the source.[10] After Simm's arrest, senior officers at Yasenevo mulled the possibility that there was a traitor in their ranks. There were whispers about possible plans for staff who had known about Simm to take lie-detector tests. Nothing came of them.

Occasionally, Elena or Andrei made brief trips to Moscow to meet with Poteyev and others at Directorate S. These visits posed security risks, and involved circuitous routes and passport changes to make sure their primary passports were not marred by evidence of a trip to Russia. On one occasion, Elena flew to Paris and took a train to Vienna, where she retrieved a fake British passport in a new name, which she then used to fly to Moscow, on the pretext that she was attending a business meeting. When in Moscow, she stayed largely confined to a *konskvartira*, unable to see much of the extraordinary changes that capitalism had brought to the city since she left it in the 1980s. She likely met with a number of handlers, including Poteyev. One purpose for the brief visits

that illegals took back to Moscow had always been to give their handlers the opportunity to evaluate their psychological state and loyalty to the cause. But Elena Vavilova was a devoted servant to the SVR; it was the man interrogating her who was not.

On one occasion, Poteyev was driving a retired illegal, Lyudmila Nuikina, through Moscow to a *konskvartira*, where she was due to mentor an illegal couple about to embark on a mission. Lyudmila and her husband, Vitaly, had been hastily withdrawn from illegal work in the 1980s after the KGB realised its London resident, Oleg Gordievsky, who knew the couple, had been working as a British double agent. Nuikina was musing on the topic to Poteyev, when she turned to him, face scrunched in fury, and said, 'You know, if I met Gordievsky today, I'd rip his eyes out.' She shoved her fingers close to Poteyev's face to illustrate her point. He nodded uneasily.[11]

By 2010, the FBI's man in Moscow had spent more than a decade undetected in the heart of the most secret department of Russia's intelligence apparatus. Now he was at the end of his tether. He wanted to leave and start the new life for himself and his family that had been the final part of his deal with the FBI.

By this time, Russia had a new president, in name at least. In 2008, the two terms the constitution allowed Putin to serve as president ended. He stepped back to become prime minister and anointed a long-standing associate, Dmitry Medvedev, as his heir. Medvedev was a Putin loyalist, but he was younger and did not have a KGB background. He spoke in a very different register from Putin, talking of a Russia open to the West, a place where personal freedoms could flourish and where innovation would drive economic growth. Although Putin was still calling the shots from the sidelines, many in the West hoped Medvedev might in time steer Russia on a more conciliatory course. In public, Putin and Medvedev put on a united front, but privately there was jostling for position. A fork in the road emerged: either Medvedev and his band of younger technocrats would embark on a path of reform, or Putin and his clique of hard-line former KGB hands would retain control and deepen the country's rift with the West.

In retrospect, there was only ever going to be one outcome, but for a time figures around Medvedev felt they had a fighting chance. Partly to

boost the influence of the new president, Barack Obama launched a ‘reset’ of relations with Russia in 2009, hoping to build a connection with Medvedev and collaborate with Russia on global challenges such as those posed by Iran and North Korea. Ahead of a planned summit between the two heads of state, the Centre sent Andrei, Elena, and Richard and Cynthia Murphy a request for information about Obama’s goals as well as for intel on what arguments or enticements his team planned to use to ‘lure’ Russia into cooperation. The SVR was just as sceptical as the CIA about the possibility of positive relations with Washington. They also asked for ‘titbits unknown publicly but revealed in private by sources close to State department, Government, major think tanks’.

It was a puzzling use of illegals. Moscow now had immeasurably more ways to discern US thinking than it had possessed during the Soviet period. There were dozens of Russian diplomats, analysts and academics who could have provided well-sourced information. Richard Murphy, meanwhile, was a stay-at-home dad and Cynthia was an MBA student and tax consultant. Andrei had much better contacts, but he was still unlikely to have access to meaningful insider information. But Putin, and the other former KGB hands among the country’s leadership, inherently respected information obtained through clandestine methods. When Putin received his daily briefings in the Kremlin, he was likely to pay more heed to the Murphys’ stabs in the dark, packaged in a top-secret red folder and sourced to deep-cover agents planted inside the United States, than to reports based on official conversations in Washington.

By 2010, dozens of agents had worked full-time on Operation Ghost Stories for years, at enormous cost to the FBI. Mostly, the illegals were not up to much that would trouble US national security interests. But they were always one encounter away from causing significant harm. The FBI had noticed that Andrei was sniffing around people with sensitive jobs in the nuclear industry. Elena had recently got a job at a real estate start-up whose clients were frequently interesting people in the worlds of tech, business and politics. Her new job provided her with an easy way to get inside their homes. Cynthia Murphy was managing the tax affairs for Alan Patricof, a Democratic fundraiser and friend of Hillary Clinton’s.

When the signal came in 2010 that Poteyev wanted out, it seemed a good time to round them up.

In early 2010, the FBI director, Robert Mueller, briefed his CIA counterpart, Leon Panetta, on Operation Ghost Stories. Plans were drawn up for a coordinated series of arrests. On 11 June, Mueller visited the White House with FBI, CIA and Justice Department officials to brief Obama and senior aides. It became clear there was a political problem. Medvedev was soon making a significant visit to the United States, and Obama didn't want to ruin his chances of 'resetting' relations. Many in the administration genuinely wanted to see the reset succeed, and aggressive options, such as putting all the spies on trial and expelling dozens of Russian diplomats, were vetoed by the White House. Mueller and Panetta explained that the source had to be withdrawn from Russia immediately. As soon as Moscow realised Directorate S had been compromised, the illegals would receive SOS signals, and they had passports and escape plans ready for such an eventuality. Obama seemed irritated at being presented with the dilemma, saying the story reminded him of a John le Carré novel. 'The whole relations with Russia at risk for this kind of thing?' he complained to Mueller.[12] Eventually, a compromise was agreed upon: the arrests would go ahead, but not until after Medvedev's visit, so as not to embarrass him.

The Russian president arrived in California on 22 June, cutting a very different image from his predecessor and the man many feared was still running the country. He visited Twitter headquarters and posted his first tweet. He met with Steve Jobs and Arnold Schwarzenegger, before flying to Washington for talks at the White House. Afterwards, Obama took Medvedev to a fast-food joint in Arlington. The two men grinned for the cameras as they tucked into their burgers. Maybe, some commentators suggested tentatively, the 'reset' was going to work.

The next day, a Friday, Poteyev left SVR headquarters in Yasenevo for the final time. He needed to get to Ukraine, from where the CIA could safely exfiltrate him. Foreign travel for SVR officials now had to be approved, and the month before, Poteyev had asked his bosses for a week off, supposedly to visit a lover in Odesa, claiming she had given birth to his child. When he was denied, the CIA put a reserve plan in place. They prepared a fake Russian passport for Poteyev in the name of Viktor Dudochkin. After clearing his desk at Yasenevo and wishing his

colleagues a good weekend, Poteyev went home. He told his wife, Marina, that he had to leave urgently for a business trip. She accompanied him to the palatial pale-green Belarus Station, where he boarded a train to Minsk. There was no border control between Russia and Belarus, but it must still have been a nerve-racking overnight journey, waiting for a knock on the door to his compartment or a welcome committee on the station platform at Minsk the next morning. But the ride went smoothly, and so did the border crossing from Belarus to Ukraine. The CIA forgery was good enough.

Later, piecing together Poteyev's moves, the SVR came to believe he was met inside Ukraine by CIA handlers, who whisked him to Ivano-Frankivsk in the west of the country. There, he boarded a plane to Frankfurt and then continued on to the United States. From the journey, he texted his wife, 'I am leaving not for a short time but forever. Do not turn the children against me.'[13]

Andrei and Elena had planned an ambitious family vacation for Alex and Tim that summer, to France, Turkey and Russia. All four had applied for Russian tourist visas. It was a surprising choice of destination, but Alex insisted on the trip. The family had been to so many places in Europe and Asia, but never to Russia. Elena and Andrei later claimed they would have remained in character as Canadians for the entirety of the trip, but it seems likely that the visit was designed to be the moment they revealed everything to their sons, and perhaps introduced them to Poteyev and their other handlers in Moscow, just as Rudi Herrmann had done with his son Peter thirty years earlier. In fact, the FBI believed Andrei and Elena had already told Tim something about their identities, a claim Tim would later fervently deny.

Sunday, 27 June, Tim's twentieth birthday, was a warm and overcast day in Boston. In the middle of the afternoon, an FBI convoy set off across town. The cars contained more than forty officers, including debriefing agents, search groups, and forensic experts. In Yonkers, Arlington and other locations across the country, similar teams were springing into action.

After years renting an apartment on Trowbridge Street, Andrei and Elena had recently purchased a condo a few doors down. Police blocked both ends of the road, and FBI teams approached the house from the

front and the rear. Once Elena opened the door, agents separated her and Andrei in different corners of the living room, handcuffed them, and patted them down. Later, they were driven away, and afterwards an agent sat Tim and Alex down and told them their parents had been arrested on suspicion of being ‘unlawful agents of a foreign government’. He refused to elaborate. Alex was sure this was a case of mistaken identity. Even when the brothers heard on the radio a few days later that the FBI had rounded up ten Russian spies across the territory of the United States, he remained certain it was all a terrible mistake.

At a brief court appearance on 1 July, Andrei and Elena denied all the charges against them. Elena was allowed to talk briefly with Tim and Alex. She told them not to worry. They should use the Russian visas they had obtained for their planned trip that summer and fly to Moscow, she said. This seemed an odd move, but the family home was besieged by reporters, and the boys did not have better plans. Someone who spoke with both boys at this time recalled that Alex appeared bewildered and confused, while Tim looked calm but worried. Did this simply reflect the difference in their ages, or did Tim know more than he let on?[14]

In the end, both Tim and Alex left for Paris. They stayed there with friends for a few days and then flew on to Moscow. Alex spent the flight nervous and confused, unsure what awaited them. When they landed, they were met at the plane door by a group of people who introduced themselves as colleagues of the boys’ parents. Tim and Alex were escorted through passport control and out of the airport to a van. On the drive into Moscow, their escorts showed the brothers old photographs of their parents in KGB uniforms, taken at the end of their training period. For Alex, this was the moment it finally sank in that the unthinkable was true. They were driven to a *konskvartira*, where the SVR handlers did their best to make them feel comfortable. The handlers took the brothers on visits to museums and procured them tickets for a ballet performance at the Bolshoi Theatre. One day, an old lady came to see them, and was introduced as their grandmother. She didn’t speak English, and there wasn’t much conversation.

Back in Boston, a Russian diplomat entered Andrei’s and Elena’s cells and informed them that a high-level deal had been struck to allow them to return home. The SVR would swap ten illegals for four Russians accused of spying for the West and currently languishing in Russian jails,

including Sergei Skripal, the GRU officer who had been recruited by Britain's MI6. Andrei and Elena were transferred to New York, where they appeared in court with eight other illegals to admit their guilt. Then they were put on an unmarked Boeing 767 and flown to Vienna. The ten illegals walked across the tarmac to a Russian plane, passing the four freed Russians on the way. When Elena was reunited with her sons in Moscow, she was still wearing her orange jail uniform.

The FBI decided that if it was not going to be able to put the illegals on trial, it would at least release a large amount of information about them, to show just how thoroughly the Russian spies had been surveilled. The selective details made the illegals sound comically inept. Most notable was an incident just before the arrests, when Anna Chapman had bought a burner telephone to call her father, tossing the box into a bin on the street. FBI watchers retrieved it and discovered her rather weak attempt at subterfuge: she had given her address as '99 Fake Street'.[15]

In Moscow, Putin was livid. It would be some time before Poteyev's name surfaced in public, but when asked about the person who had betrayed the illegals, Putin could hardly conceal his rage. 'How will he be able to look into the eyes of his children, the pig? Whatever he got in exchange for it, those thirty pieces of silver he was given, he will choke on them. Believe me.'[16] Later, a military court in Moscow sentenced Poteyev to twenty-five years in prison in absentia, but that was just the formal punishment. A Russian news outlet published a quotation from an unnamed Kremlin source. 'We know who he is and where he is … And there's no doubt that a Mercader has been sent for him,' said the source, referencing the agent who had assassinated Trotsky more than seventy years before.[17]

The SVR arranged a grand tour of Russia for the illegals and their families: Sochi on the Black Sea, St Petersburg, and Lake Baikal. Alex and Tim chatted with Mikhail Vasenkov, who had been forced to shed his Juan Lazaro alter ego after more than three decades. He could hardly remember how to speak Russian, and he did not seem happy to be back in a place that no longer felt like home. Later, the illegals met with Medvedev, who awarded them medals, and then with Putin, who asked them questions about their life undercover and told them a few opaque stories about his own time as an illegals support officer.

Most of the deep-cover illegals were set up with well-paid consultancy jobs at state companies. Andrei became an adviser to Igor Sechin, a close confidant of Putin's who ran Russia's largest oil company and was one of the most feared people in the country, while Elena got a role at the metals giant Norilsk Nickel. They also acquired a tastefully renovated apartment close to the Moscow River. Andrei and Elena had spent hardly any time in their homeland since they left in the 1980s, and they soon realised how little they knew about the country they had served: political figures, cultural milestones, popular songs and films had all passed them by. There was also an aggression and brashness to capitalist Moscow that was at odds with the genteel Soviet reality that Elena remembered.

Marooned in their own homeland, Andrei and Elena decided to contact one of the few people in Moscow who might understand their predicament. During their training in the late 1980s, they had never met Yuri Drozdov; they just knew he was their ultimate boss as the head of Directorate S. Now they called on him at the offices of his consulting company, where he still showed up every day despite being in his eighties. Elena and Andrei reminisced with him about the good old days of the Soviet Union and reminded him of how Andrei, soon after his departure for Canada, had composed a poem honouring former generations of illegals and sent it by encrypted message back to Moscow. Drozdov thought the couple represented everything that had been bright and good about the 1980s Soviet Union, and warned Andrei and Elena that nothing positive would come from the increasing Western influence in Russia. He eventually died in 2017, at the age of ninety-one, bitter and uneasy about modern Russia's trajectory.[18]

Poteyev's defection decimated the SVR's illegal networks, and not only in the United States. He told the FBI about a man called Henry Frith, who had spent two decades running a consultancy company in Madrid. The day after Andrei and Elena's arrest, an MI6 officer confronted Frith, whose real name was Sergei Cherepanov, outside his Madrid home and asked to speak to him privately. Cherepanov repeatedly insisted that there had been a mistake and refused to talk. The next morning, he flew to Moscow and never returned to the West.[19]

There were illegals in the Middle East and Africa that Poteyev did not have the security clearance to know about, but it was impossible for the

SVR to be certain that he had not picked up office gossip that might put the Americans and their allies onto the scent of other illegals. He also knew everything about communication channels, operational security, and new illegals in training. It was an unmitigated disaster for the SVR. In 2013, a microphone hidden by the FBI caught two of the SVR's legal officers in the United States talking about how hard it was to do useful work in the country.

'Directorate S is the only intelligence that is real intelligence,' said one.

'It *was*,' came the plaintive reply.[20]

Poteyev's betrayal had indeed put an end to Directorate S operations in America, but the concept of illegal work was far from dead. Instead, Moscow pivoted to a new kind of illegal, adapted for the digital world. Instead of simply watching and analysing American political life, these new illegals would be tasked with influencing it.

26

The Virtual Illegals:

Election Meddling and Easy Deniability

On a miserably rainy Moscow evening in November 2016, Andrei Bezrukov spoke to a small audience in the upstairs room of a members-only club not far from the Kremlin. In addition to his lucrative job at an oil company, Andrei had become a professor in international relations at MGIMO, one of Russia's top universities. The title of his talk that evening was 'Inside the American Mind'. It was a timely topic; the previous day, the wild-card Republican candidate, Donald Trump, had triumphed over Hillary Clinton and been elected America's forty-fifth president. Andrei spoke about the historical significance of Trump's victory and about his experiences in America as an illegal.

The discontent that had led to Trump's victory had been marinating for years, Andrei claimed. Soon after he and Elena had arrived in the United States, he said, they went on a road trip to get a sense of the country. 'My feeling then was that infrastructure-wise and in terms of the way people feel, this was not such a great country as was being sold everywhere on the news.' He described the United States as having a 'fin de régime' air that reminded him of the 1980s Soviet Union. The elites had not yet realised that the foundations of their system were no longer tenable, he said.

Dressed in a sharp navy suit and a checked shirt, Andrei spoke in lilting, declarative sentences with the air of a tutor imparting wisdom, that same slightly self-satisfied tone that so many people had noticed in his alter ego Don Heathfield. He talked in glowing terms about Trump, hailing his win as a 'historic opportunity' for hard-working and neglected residents of the Rust Belt.

After Andrei finished his talk, there was time for questions. Someone asked about the elephant in the room. Andrei had been chatting away about Trump for an hour, but had not mentioned one of the biggest news

stories of the past months, the allegation that Russian intelligence had intervened to boost Trump's chances of electoral success. Andrei dismissed the idea that Moscow had backed Trump with a chuckle. 'We have some experience of how Clinton might behave, but we don't have any experience of how Trump might behave. So, making a very risky political decision to intervene has zero benefit,' he said. 'All of this is just rumour; it's nonsense,' he added, confidently.

Maybe he was lying, or maybe he really did not know about any of the various components of Moscow's operation to support Donald Trump. Either way, Andrei's claim could not have been further from the truth.

By the time the US election came around in 2016, Putin was more powerful than ever at home and angrier with the West than he had been at any time since he took office. In 2011, he had dashed the already faint hopes for a new, more liberal Russia under a second Medvedev term, when he announced his plan to return to the presidency. In response, a wave of protests erupted in Moscow and other major cities. The crowds were mostly made up of disaffected middle-class Russians who had travelled abroad and wanted to see changes at home. The folders of carefully sifted intelligence Putin received each day reinforced his belief that the Americans were fanning the flames of protest inside Russia. In his mind, Washington was once again the Main Enemy, determined to bring Moscow to its knees. 'We are all grown-ups here. We all understand the organizers are acting according to a well-known scenario,' he said bitterly.

The protests culminated in a huge rally not far from the Kremlin the day before Putin's inauguration in May 2012. Demonstrators clashed with riot police, who detained hundreds. Some were later charged with criminal offences and put on trial, to scare the rest into acquiescence. One man was sentenced to two and a half years in prison for throwing a lemon. The next day, Putin's motorcade left the White House, the seat of the prime minister, and glided through central Moscow for his ceremonial return to the Kremlin, along eerie streets that had been emptied of people.

Putin's third term marked a new phase in his rule as he became more repressive at home and emboldened abroad. When, in 2014, a revolution in Kyiv deposed Russia's preferred choice of Ukrainian president, Putin

responded by annexing the Crimea peninsula. Partly, he was channelling a Russian imperialist mindset, believing Ukraine was not a real country and that large parts of it were historically Russian. But there was also something else at play. Putin was certain that Western appeals to freedom, human rights and democracy were a cynical smoke screen for geopolitical power games. He believed the revolution in Kyiv was directed from Western capitals, which were readying Ukraine as a launching pad for an eventual assault on Russia. This fanciful thinking was shared by his spy chiefs and close advisers, most of whom had also been schooled in the paranoid logic of the KGB. If the West, and particularly the Americans, were utilising all kinds of nefarious tools to interfere in Russia, thought Putin, there was no reason why he should not do the same in reverse.

The hierarchies of power had been firmly set in the Soviet Union, but in Putin's court they were chaotic, with officials and associates jostling for money and influence in what some analysts have called an 'adhocracy'.[1] Courtiers desperately tried to curry favour with the leader, and a slip-up like the Poteyev affair was seen by others as an opportunity to step into the space freed up by the SVR's failures. So it came to pass that the most notorious Russian espionage operation of the post-Soviet era was not directed by the SVR, nor by any other of Russia's established spying agencies. Instead, it was an informal operation run by Yevgeny Prigozhin, a former acquaintance of Putin's who employed a group of online keyboard warriors from an office block in St Petersburg.

Prigozhin's operation was initially designed to influence the Russian domestic audience. The government had used a mixture of acquisitions and coercion to keep television stations and newspapers on message, but the internet was a trickier proposition. As more Russians spent time online, authorities in some Russian regions hired people to intervene in debates on internet forums to ensure that loyalist voices dominated. Some of these so-called troll factories had indirect links to the Kremlin; others were organised by local politicians or business figures. The Internet Research Agency (IRA), based out of a nondescript four-storey office block on Savushkina Street in St Petersburg, was probably the biggest. It housed hundreds of paid workers, who spent long shifts cranking out comments on social media that buttressed Kremlin messaging on matters of domestic and foreign policy.

Prigozhin was informally known as Putin's chef, because he had owned one of Putin's favourite restaurants in St Petersburg during the 1990s. When Putin became president, Prigozhin used his connections to cater government events and win lucrative state contracts. Much later, he acquired a taste for the spotlight, enjoying infamy as the founder and backer of the Wagner Group, a private military company, and cultivating the image of a malevolent maverick who revelled in violence and atrocity. But in 2015 Prigozhin was just one of many of Putin's associates who were looking to amass money and influence.

Every day, workers arrived for shifts at the IRA. They logged in to a computer and turned on a VPN to hide their IP address. They signed in to various fake social media accounts. In one office, trolls worked in teams of three: the first would leave a complaint on a comment forum about a local problem; then the other two would chime in, referencing links to articles on Kremlin-friendly websites to show that the authorities were aware of the problem and handling it. On forums with international news stories, the trolls posted memes extolling Putin and castigating Barack Obama. Other departments created full-fledged online characters. Each member of the team handling LiveJournal, a blogging platform still popular in Russia at the time, crafted several sophisticated online personas. 'We had to write "ordinary posts", about making cakes or music tracks we liked, but every now and then throw in a political post about how the Kyiv government is fascist,' said one of the workers, who was paid around $800 a month for working full-time at the troll farm.[2]

When Putin annexed Crimea in 2014, the Internet Research Agency set up an English-language team. Initially, the new department focused on the comment forums of Western newspapers and other media outlets, churning out a diet of pro-Kremlin messaging. Every day, the workers received a sheet of 'technical tasks' that outlined the main talking points. Usually, they involved praising Putin, calling out the hypocritical moralising of Western leaders, and denouncing Ukrainian politicians as neo-Nazis. When leading English-language outlets wrote stories about Russia, the comment threads underneath the articles online would quickly fill up with dozens of contributions from readers with usernames like 'OklahomaRay' or 'ManUtdFan1982' who would claim, with dubious English syntax, to be ordinary Westerners who were disgusted with the United States and NATO and admirers of Putin. A large

proportion of these posts could be traced back to the IRA. It was a crude operation, but Prigozhin soon devised a more sophisticated plan. Instead of trying to persuade Americans to respect Putin, the IRA's trolls were to focus on exploiting the divides inside America, turning Americans against each other and fanning partisan divides as a bitter election campaign got under way.

In August 2016, six weeks after Donald Trump had secured the Republican presidential nomination, a Facebook group called Florida for Trump received a direct message from Matt Skiber, who introduced himself as a local pro-Trump activist. Skiber was an administrator of Being Patriotic, another popular right-wing Facebook group. He wrote with a suggestion: 'What about organizing a YUGE pro-Trump flash mob in every Florida town? We are currently reaching out to local activists and we've got the folks who are okay to be in charge of organizing their events almost everywhere in FL. However, we still need your support. What do you think about that? Are you in?'

An administrator on the page wrote back to Skiber, thanking him for his enthusiasm and giving him the email address for Chad Tucker, the communications director for the Trump campaign in Florida. Skiber was telling the truth when he said he had a roster of local activists willing to help: he had even transferred money to some of them to purchase placards for demonstrations, as well as prison overalls and a metal cage so that pro-Trump rallies could feature the spectacle of a jailed 'Hillary Clinton'. But Matt Skiber was an IRA cut-out, created in St Petersburg and tasked with contacting real Americans to boost the Trump campaign. His Being Patriotic page was also run out of St Petersburg, despite claiming to be a grassroots American initiative.

The IRA had many Skibers. Some of them used personal data stolen from real Americans by hackers so that PayPal accounts could be set up in their names to pay organisers. Others were invented in the time it took to create a Facebook account and fill it with a profile picture and a few fake posts. By the end of August, these virtual illegals had contacted more than a hundred real Americans and organised dozens of rallies, usually by appointing a real person to help with coordinating an event on the ground. Then the organiser would make an excuse for why they could not attend the event on the day. Instead, they would put media outlets in

touch with the local coordinator and share photographs of the events on their accounts. These Facebook groups remained active all the way until Election Day, when Trump won the presidency.[3]

Measuring the real-world impact of these troll-illegals is difficult. Did they change anyone's mind, or alter the outcome of the election? Plenty of Americans needed no encouragement to be swayed by Trump's divisive messaging, and Russia did not create America's racial and class divides. Additionally, many of the rallies that Russian accounts organised were small and attracted crowds of people who were already die-hard Trump fanatics. But the social media presence was certainly not marginal. Facebook estimated that 120 fake Russia-backed pages wrote eighty thousand posts during and after the election, which were directly seen by 29 million Americans and reached as many as 126 million people when reposts and shares were counted.[4]

It is impossible to know how many of those 126 million might have been swing voters. But the fact that a Russian influence operation could stealthily reach millions of Americans, and secretly arrange protests on domestic issues without any outward sign of Russian participation, was remarkable. It had taken the KGB years to create fake identities like Don Heathfield and Ann Foley for its illegals. Matt Skiber could be brought to life with a few clicks of a mouse. And if anyone became suspicious of Skiber, he could be deleted as quickly as he had been created. A new virtual identity could take his place.

Putin and Prigozhin had a problem, though. The internet had made it easy to create virtual illegals, but it also made it easy to find them. The IRA's actions initially went undetected, even as rumours swirled that Putin wanted Trump to win. But the factory was just one part of Putin's 2016 election interference operation, which also involved hacking operations run by Russia's intelligence agencies and numerous other initiatives. Some parts of this multipronged effort were brilliantly executed, while others were slapdash and clumsy. When the evidence of Russian meddling became too great to ignore, Robert Mueller was appointed as special counsel to investigate. By early 2018, his team had put together an indictment of the IRA, naming Prigozhin and twelve other individuals.

As well as Prigozhin and his band of keyboard warriors, the GRU, Russia's military intelligence agency, stepped up its game following the SVR's retreat in the wake of the Poteyev fiasco. During the Soviet period, the GRU had its own illegals programme separate from the KGB efforts. With firmly closed archives and few defectors, the full picture of how the GRU ran illegals over the years remains murky, although every now and then, one of its operatives became a public name, such as Richard Sorge, who sent back intelligence from Japan on Hitler's plans to attack the Soviet Union.

In the years after 2010, the GRU launched a unit of flying illegals who carried out assassinations, explosions and arson attacks across Europe. The illegals from Unit 29155 did not use complicated foreign identities that took years to learn; instead, they posed as Russian tourists, or else used passports from former Soviet countries.[5] In 2014, two weapons contractors travelling on Moldovan and Tajikistani passports appeared in the Czech Republic, as part of a mission to blow up an arms depot the GRU believed was being used to funnel weapons to Ukraine. Four years later, the same two men resurfaced in Britain posing as holidaying Russian vitamin salesmen. They travelled to the cathedral city of Salisbury, where they attempted to poison the former GRU defector Sergei Skripal with Novichok, a deadly nerve agent. Skripal had arrived in Britain in 2010, after being released as part of the swap deal that saw Andrei, Elena and the other illegals betrayed by Poteyev return to Russia. Later, a kill squad was sent to the United States to find Poteyev, but the FBI was able to move him to a new location before the assassins got to him.[6]

The brazenness of these operations, from election hacking to assassination, was part of the point. If they prompted fear in the West about what Russia might do next, that was no bad thing for Putin, who was increasingly angry about the global order and determined that Moscow should be taken seriously. But all the bad publicity had a side effect: it made Russia toxic again. For two decades, Russian tourists had travelled the globe freely. Western capital cities had opened their doors – and their banks – to Russian émigrés, and millions of Russians had moved to live abroad, unthinkable during the Soviet period. Now, as the newspapers were full of stories about Russian spies, assassins and trolls, all Russians once again became potentially suspicious. The era when

people like Anna Chapman could schmooze around New York without her contacts even considering she might be a spy was over. This made the old concept of traditional illegals, in foreign identities, attractive once again.

In 2017, Putin gathered the upper ranks of the SVR in the conference hall at the agency's Yasenevo headquarters. His speech touched upon a familiar theme: the West was out to weaken Russia, just as it always had been. The Cold War had little to do with capitalism versus Communism, Putin now claimed. It was just one of the many iterations of the West's centuries-long quest to destroy Russia, which continued today with NATO expansion into Eastern Europe and hostile rhetoric about democratic backsliding in Russia.

Putin praised his daily briefings from the SVR as invaluable and claimed that illegals often provided the most useful information. No other espionage agency could boast anything similar, he said. 'Illegals are built in a particular way, with strong morals and a firm character,' said Putin. 'We are proud of them.'

After Putin, the SVR's recently appointed head, Sergei Naryshkin, took the floor. One of many of Putin's former KGB acquaintances who now held top positions in Russia, Naryshkin reminded the assembled officers of the moment ninety-five years earlier when Meer Trilisser had established the first illegals department. Back then, the young republic was so isolated that illegal work was the most effective weapon in its arsenal, said Naryshkin. 'And here we see a parallel with the present day, when a whole group of NATO countries is carrying out aggressive policies toward us. In these conditions we are obliged to find new methods and ways of working.'

Naryshkin paused, surveying the long rows of cadres in the cavernous hall, most of them elderly men with greying hair. 'Together we have been called on by the motherland to defend her interests, using very special powers, means, and methods to do so,' he said. 'The most powerful weapon of the SVR was and still is the illegals. I am certain that the leadership of the country and our citizens trust us and await concrete results of our work.'[7]

The illegals programme had risen from the ashes of Stalin's purges, survived World War II, and had even been revived after the Soviet

Union’s collapse. Now, seven years after Poteyev’s betrayal, Putin and Naryshkin sent a clear message to their Western adversaries: Russia’s illegals were headed to the West once again.

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The Lives of Wonderful People:

The Cult of the Illegal

Putin's core mission, ever since he took office, had been to restore in Russians a sense of pride about their country's history and a feeling that they were part of a great nation. Victory in the Great Patriotic War became something akin to a secular religion in Putin's Russia, and the darker sides of the Soviet era were simply ignored. 'We cannot allow ourselves to be saddled with guilt,' he once told a meeting of history teachers. With each passing year, the historical revisionism grew more intense, particularly after the annexation of Crimea in 2014. Schools focused on patriotic tuition, and it became a criminal offence to suggest similarities between Stalin's Soviet Union and Hitler's Germany. Russia was portrayed as a heroic martyr through the ages, making huge sacrifices in its fight for goodness and light and never receiving the appropriate gratitude from the West.

As a former KGB man, Putin felt the intelligence services had a special role to play in this heavily curated narrative of Russia's past. The illegals, so unlike anything else in espionage history, provided particularly fertile ground for mythmaking. The romanticised ideal of spies who devoted their lives to their motherland for years on end fit well with Putin's drive to paint Russia as a land of pure patriotism and higher ideals, in comparison to a globalised, decaying West. A cult of the illegal began to emerge, carefully managed from SVR headquarters.

Statues to Dmitry Bystrolyotov, Iskhak Akhmerov and the wartime intelligence head Pavel Fitin appeared in various cities. The SVR had kept its files on illegals firmly closed, but now granted carefully selected Russian authors access to the archives so they could write hagiographical biographies, many of which appeared in a long-running series called *The Lives of Wonderful People.* The author of a book on Iosif Grigulevich, the illegal who went undercover as the Costa Rican ambassador Teodoro

Castro, was himself a former KGB officer. He admitted privately that censors from the SVR had ‘crossed out half’ of his finished manuscript to make sure it remained on message. On state television, the popular anchor Sergei Brilev, who often interviewed Putin, presented a series of programmes that regaled viewers with heroic stories about illegals. For a new documentary about Dmitry Bystrolyotov in 2022, Naryshkin gave an introductory speech, brandishing a collection of Bystrolyotov’s passports retrieved from the archive and waxing lyrical about the old illegal’s talents.

In another episode, Brilev was allowed to film inside the SVR’s headquarters at Yasenevo, breathlessly showing off the cafeteria, the manicured gardens and a newly erected monument inside the grounds, portraying an illegal couple setting out from Moscow on a long mission abroad. He talked with Naryshkin in the SVR chief’s wood-panelled office and asked how many illegals might be out in the world today. Naryshkin smiled and raised his eyebrows conspiratorially.

Some of Brilev’s documentaries focused on retired illegals who were still alive, introducing them to the Russian public for the first time. One was devoted to Yuri Shevchenko, who had spent his career in Europe under French cover, apparently posing as a street artist. ‘For an illegal, nothing is impossible,’ said Shevchenko as he gave the television crew a tour of his country house, where he was living out his retirement. The programme featured previously secret footage of Shevchenko receiving a Hero of Russia medal from Putin in the Kremlin in 2017, and the voice-over repeatedly suggested that he had been responsible for world-changing espionage coups during his time in the field. But there was a convenient lack of detail on what exactly it was that he had supposedly achieved. The toll that illegal work took on so many operatives was simply glossed over. Shevchenko explained how he and his wife had been forced to leave their newborn baby at home with a grandparent when they set out on their first mission abroad, mentioning in passing that his wife soon began having ‘terrible headaches’ and was withdrawn from service. There was no more detail about this family trauma. Instead, he made his whole career sound like an exciting caper. ‘All of us on this earth get just one life. But not illegals. They can live several different lives, all full of adventures,’ said Shevchenko, a twinkle in his eyes.[1]

Yuri Linov, whose wife, Tamara, had also been kicked off the programme soon after they were sent abroad, did not get his own documentary. His days selling bath mats in Dublin, his work to track down dissidents during the Prague Spring, and his capture in Israel did not fit the narrative of heroic patriots now spun by the SVR. He had been exiled to Kyiv after his return from Israeli prison, and he was not part of the cosy club of retired illegals who went on to become trainers for new recruits and were well taken care of by the SVR.

When the Soviet Union collapsed, Yuri had tried his hand at several business ventures, without great success. Eventually, he and Tamara moved back to Kalach, the backwater town a ten-hour drive from Moscow where he had grown up. He taught English and German to the few ambitious locals who were looking for a way to get out of dreary Kalach, and tried his best to take care of Tamara, acknowledging a debt of guilt for dragging her into the illegals programme in the first place. On the occasions Yuri and Tamara argued, they still tended to do so in German. Few people in Kalach knew much about Yuri's past, and when they saw the elderly local man yammering away in fluent German, or asking a surly waitress in a fly-ridden canteen for the bill by chirping 'What's the damage?' in Dublin-lilted English, they gave the kind of indulgent half smile usually offered to senile eccentrics.

Tamara, in the years after being kicked out of the illegals programme, became deeply religious. In her old age, she had regular anxiety attacks and rarely left the house. She could remember with startling clarity her childhood, her studies and her odd courting by Yuri. But when it came to her training and the year she spent in East Germany, as well as all the time she spent waiting for Yuri to come home from his missions abroad, the memories coalesced into a dark mass. 'Whatever you do, never abandon your children,' is about all she could manage to say before becoming too upset to continue.

In 2020, the SVR announced it was 'unmasking' seven more illegals, making their names and biographies public so Russians could marvel at their patriotic achievements. The group included Vitaly Nuikin and his wife, Lyudmila, an illegal couple who the SVR's press release claimed had worked in eighteen different countries. The Nuikins had stolen secrets that had helped the Soviets close the technology gap, the SVR

said, sourcing prototypes for early computers, technical details for missile systems, and much more. Vitaly was long dead, but Lyudmila gave a round of newspaper and television interviews, explaining how she had happily devoted her life to the Soviet cause, even leaving her young son in a boarding school run by the KGB during her long years abroad.[2]

Buried in the notes that Vasily Mitrokhin took secretly from the KGB archives, before defecting to the West, is a brief appraisal of the Nuikins that tells a very different story. Mitrokhin's notes record that after working in Indonesia from 1973 to 1977, the Nuikins moved to Singapore, where they set up a cover business called Francotone Electronic. They lived in Singapore until 1980, but their handlers in Moscow grew increasingly frustrated with the couple. 'They have no operative use, their grasp of *konspiratsiya* is weak, they are prone to outbursts and are inappropriate bordering on rude in communications with the Center,' the assessment complained.[3]

In the new environment of enforced patriotism, these inconvenient historical facts were simply rewritten. All illegals were now portrayed as heroes, and their achievements wildly exaggerated, whether they were long since retired or more recent returns. When Andrei and Elena appeared on television talk shows, it was never mentioned that they had spent ten years being tracked by the FBI, and had thus been unable to achieve much of value. Instead, they were introduced as 'legendary intelligence officers' who had ferreted out American secrets.

A more honest appraisal of the past century would note that the history of the illegals offers a neat reflection of the story of Russia itself. The early programme, with its soaring ambition, its obsession with subterfuge, and its disregard for the well-being of individuals, holds up a mirror to the fiery utopianism of the early Soviet Union. In the 1920s, using illegals was an ingenious way to gather intelligence for a country with little diplomatic presence abroad, and helped bolster the position of the young Soviet regime. But the obsession with subterfuge and conspiracy also contributed to the regime's most destructive moment, the Great Terror of 1937, with Stalin convinced that enemy illegals had burrowed deep into Soviet society.

During the Cold War, illegals were often useful, but mainly because the Soviet Union was a closed state that did not allow its citizens to

travel. Creating fake foreigners who could visit the West without raising suspicion was the only way for the KGB to access relatively basic information about its adversaries. The Soviet elite struggled to understand the West, and even when the illegals did send back useful intelligence, it was often ignored or poorly analysed. It is telling that one of the biggest successes of the illegals programme in the late Soviet period was Operation Progress, aimed at snuffing out dissent in the socialist bloc.

Every now and then, illegals still managed to pull off something that justified their long years of training. Often, they worked as handlers for sources too sensitive to risk being seen with legal KGB officers, and flying illegals carried out missions that normal intelligence officers could never have managed. But the available evidence suggests that, for all the ambition, the programme routinely failed to deliver. For every illegal who achieved something useful for Moscow, there were a dozen living frustrated lives that bore little espionage fruit.

In 1921, at the dawn of the Soviet age, the Third Congress of the Communist International had issued a stark warning to European Communist parties, cautioning against getting so sucked into illegal work that simpler, legal routes were passed over. ‘In such cases, the work tends to amount to a Sisyphean labor performed by ineffectual conspirators,’ the congress had warned.[4] It was a withering assessment, and a charge that might have been levied at the illegals programme at various points over the next century. The logistical marathons required to conjure illegals into life were often wildly at odds with the modest returns the operatives provided after deployment.

From today’s perspective, this unique and hyper-intensive form of espionage seems long out of date. But the overwhelming ambition inherent in the decades-long planning horizons of the programme is unique in the history of espionage. The illegals remain shrouded in so much legend and mystique that nobody can ever be sure they have outlived their usefulness.

Afterword

On 24 February 2022, Vladimir Putin shocked almost everyone, including much of his own elite, when he ordered the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. I spent the first days of the war in Kyiv as the Russians bore down on the Ukrainian capital from three directions. On the third morning of the invasion, some colleagues and I drove to Vasylkiv, a small town south of Kyiv home to a strategic air base, which the Russian army had attacked as part of its plan to encircle the capital. Numerous buildings had been flattened by air strikes. The mayor, Nataliya Balasynovych, met us wearing a flak jacket and ushered us into the town hall, which was guarded by nervous locals fingering Kalashnikovs and was still being reinforced with sandbags. Balasynovych spoke about the Russian jets that had flown over Vasylkiv and tried to drop paratroopers at the airport. Her aides also hinted at a more insidious threat.

'There were sleepers everywhere here,' one of them whispered. 'They moved here using false identities months ago. Some married locals, blending into the surroundings and waiting for the invasion,' he claimed. The rumours of these sleeper illegals were everywhere. Someone even told me that a team of Russian special forces operatives had arrived in the town disguised as a Polish television crew. At some point, the journalists had supposedly thrown down their cameras and microphones and joined the assault.

Most of these stories were untrue, products of a wartime rumour mill. In fact, far from being a brilliant operation involving thousands of deep-cover illegals, the invasion was a colossal intelligence failure. Money earmarked for building up networks of supporters inside Ukraine had been stolen, while those in Putin's inner circle had started to believe their own propaganda that Ukraine was being dragged unwillingly away from Russia by the West. They were shocked when an overwhelming majority of Ukrainians stood defiantly against Russia's occupying forces. Like in 1941, when Stalin miscalculated before Hitler's invasion, Putin had

ignored a mountain of evidence because it did not fit his worldview. The resulting war, bloody and drawn out, was a catastrophe for Ukraine, and it will have long-lasting and devastating effects on Russia too, however it ends.

The invasion also decimated Russia's network of legal officers. In almost every European capital, spies working under diplomatic cover were ordered to return to Moscow. Suddenly, the SVR and GRU had their capabilities slashed, and hundreds of spies ended up back in Russia, unable to work abroad. It also became much harder for 'ordinary' Russian citizens to travel to Western countries, as airlines stopped flying to Russia and foreign countries tightened their visa policies. The GRU would no longer be able to use Russian-identity flying illegals, like the 'vitamin salesmen' who had poisoned Sergei Skripal in 2018. In the post-invasion world, they would have struggled to receive tourist visas.

There were ways to fill the gaps, such as by sending operatives abroad posing as scared young men fleeing the draft into the Russian army, to claim asylum in Western countries. But Moscow also turned again to its traditional, foreign-identity illegals, who could operate without ties to Russia. As the war in Ukraine dragged on, new illegals were apprehended in various parts of the globe. Dutch authorities deported Sergei Cherkasov, who had been posing as Brazilian researcher Victor Muller Ferreira and had arrived in the Netherlands planning to take up an internship at the International Criminal Court in The Hague, just as the court was about to start investigating Russian war crimes in Ukraine. A few months later, Norwegian authorities arrested José Assis Giammaria, supposedly a Brazilian researcher at a university in the northern city of Tromsø, who had worked, rather ironically, for an institute assessing hybrid threats to Norwegian security. Giammaria, who colleagues noted had 'a funny accent', was also a GRU illegal.[1] Another case was that of Gerhard Daniel Campos Wittich, a Brazilian of Austrian heritage, who ran a 3-D printing company in Rio de Janeiro that made sausage dog key chains and novelty resin sculptures for the Brazilian military. He left Rio in January 2023 for a holiday in Malaysia and then went dark. The last thing he told his girlfriend, a veterinarian at Brazil's Ministry of Agriculture, was that he was venturing on a hike. She raised the alarm about his disappearance in the wilderness, posting his photograph online and begging for information. In fact, he was a Russian illegal, and he had

fled to Moscow, fearful that his cover had been blown. His girlfriend had not suspected a thing, said a friend, and was now absolutely devastated.[2] After years researching historical cases of illegals sowing psychological trauma among those around them, I was watching it all happen again in real time.

In the spring of 2023, I travelled to a picturesque hamlet an hour's drive into the mountains from Slovenia's capital, Ljubljana. I had come to speak with a local artist about a curator and gallerist he had worked with, an Argentinian woman called Maria Mayer. The artist had become friends with Maria, and they had met frequently in Ljubljana, where her gallery provided a platform for many struggling Slovenian artists. She told him how she and her husband, Ludwig, had moved to Europe from Latin America a decade previously. Now they had two young kids, who had learned Slovenian at school but spoke Spanish at home.

A few weeks previously, Slovenian authorities had arrested Maria and Ludwig in one of the biggest police operations in the history of the small nation. Officers swarmed their gated pastel-orange home in a quiet Ljubljana suburb, carting the couple off to jail and taking their two children into foster care. Maria and Ludwig were accused of using 'illegally obtained foreign identity documents' and were supposedly working for a foreign intelligence service. When I got to Ljubljana, sources confirmed that the pair were Russian illegals, part of a new batch trained up after the Poteyev fiasco and the 2010 swap.

At the mountain chalet, the artist was not buying it. Undercover spies were meant to be swashbuckling and sexy; his friend Maria was neither. 'She was a grey mouse,' he told me, shaking his head. 'I don't believe she could have been a spy. Maybe she just got mixed up in something.' Other people who knew the couple gave me the same line. 'They were ordinary nice people; there is no way they were spies,' a neighbour told me, acidly, insisting the whole story had been invented by lying journalists.

But the friends and neighbours were wrong. Russian authorities had quickly admitted to the Slovenians that the pair were illegals, and discussions began about an exchange. Meanwhile, the Slovenian authorities and their allies were trying to piece together the detail of Maria and Ludwig's activities. Quiet Slovenia was the perfect European

base; its location inside the Schengen free movement zone allowed the couple to cross Europe without passport checks. Ludwig had run an IT company that did little business but gave him a pretext to travel; he had recently attended a conference in Germany that attracted thousands of senior executives working on online security. Maria also travelled frequently, to attend art fairs or put on exhibitions of Slovenian art. Perhaps she had taken stacks of money with her on these trips to pay off Russian agents. When police raided a nondescript office rented by the couple, they found so much cash that it took hours to count. There were also hundreds of thousands of euros secreted in a hidden compartment in the couple's fridge at home.[3] A security source in Ljubljana told me that Maria and Ludwig had been dormant sleepers for years after their arrival in Slovenia, but had been activated to perform more daring espionage tasks after the invasion of Ukraine.

Some months after the arrests, I met with Christo Grozev in London. Christo was a Bulgarian radio entrepreneur who had made his name with a side-gig running investigations for Bellingcat, a group of online sleuths who investigated war crimes and assassinations using open-source data. Christo focused on Russian operatives: he was the first to uncover the real identities of the GRU officers who attacked Sergei Skripal with Novichok, and he later identified the team of FSB poisoners that had used the same weapon on the opposition politician Alexei Navalny in 2020.

Now, Christo told me, he had turned his attention to illegals. He had already discovered that Maria Adela Rivera, a Peruvian jewellery designer living in Naples who socialised with numerous naval officers from NATO countries, was in fact a GRU illegal named Olga Kolobova, having tracked her down partly through microchip data from her pet cat. Now he was searching for the real identities of Maria and Ludwig. The couple had tried their hardest never to be photographed, but buried on the website of their children's school in Ljubljana was a photograph in which Maria's face was visible. Christo ordered a search of Russia's passport database using facial recognition technology; widespread corruption in the country had led to a flourishing black market in access to all kinds of personal data. The search provided a match: Maria Mayer was Anna Dultseva, born in the city of Gorky in 1981. Her husband, Ludwig, was Artem Dultsev, born the same year. Domestic travel databases showed

them moving around Russia until 2012, then simply disappearing. The couple surfaced in Spain that year and launched their decade-long existence as Argentinians.[4]

Conclusive proof that Christo was right came in August 2024, when the pair were included as part of a major prisoner exchange between Russia and the West that took place at Ankara airport. A planeload of spies and assassins headed back to Moscow, after having their jail sentences in the West commuted. Among them were the Dultsevs and their two children, reunited after eighteen months. It was only on the plane back to Moscow that the parents explained to eleven-year-old Sofia and eight-year-old Daniel that the family was not from Argentina and that they would now have a new home. On arrival at Moscow's Vnukovo Airport, the wide-eyed children descended from the plane to find a red carpet, a guard of honour standing to attention, and Vladimir Putin waiting on the tarmac. Putin greeted the confused Sofia with 'Buenas noches', and handed bouquets of flowers to her and her mother.

A few days later, the whole family appeared in a glowing report on Russian state television, strolling in the lush grounds of the SVR headquarters at Yasenevo in the summer sunshine. Anna Dultseva gushed with gratitude toward her homeland, and thanked Putin personally for his support. The children, four days into their new life in Russia, played on a monument to the fictional illegal Stierlitz, which had been unveiled at Yasenevo two years previously. It was Daniel's ninth birthday, so the correspondent gave him a toy Cheburashka, from the Soviet-era cartoon, and asked if he had learned any Russian phrases yet.

In case any viewers felt uneasy about the possible effects of all this on the young children, the correspondent reassured them that the espionage carried out by the Dultsevs during their years undercover was well worth all the deception: 'They are high-class professionals who devoted their whole lives to the motherland, making sacrifices that ordinary people could never understand. They raised their children as Spanish-speaking Catholics. Now, they will have to teach them what borscht is.'[5]

Perhaps, the wave of arrests in the two years after the invasion of Ukraine represented the round-up of the last few illegals at large. Or perhaps, there are hundreds more out there, living undetected as

foreigners and changing the world in Moscow's favour, one piece of intelligence at a time. It is hard to judge the scale of top-secret espionage programmes in real time. But one thing is almost certain: after the invasion of Ukraine caused the expulsion of so many legal Russian spies from embassies across the globe, the Kremlin has increased efforts to prepare a new generation of illegals. The Dultsevs had returned home to Russia, but many more operatives were getting ready to leave.

Just before the prisoner exchange in August 2024, I received a message from a well-connected source in Moscow. I had passed a set of specific and detailed questions about Russia's current illegals programme to this person, through a mutual contact who had agreed to act as an intermediary. The response came in the form of a photograph of two paragraphs of Cyrillic text, printed on an A4 sheet of paper. The source had ignored all my questions, and instead answered one I had not asked, on whether illegals remain relevant in the modern world. The response read as follows:

> In the age of artificial intelligence and biometric data, it has become much harder to create legends that can withhold scrutiny for new illegals. Artificial intelligence has also created the illusion that it's possible to collect information without direct human participation. But even if such information seems objective, it's filtered through technologies created by developers, with their own subjective views and mistakes. So at the moment of truth, you still need a person on the ground. A person inside the system or community you are working on, so you can make a final conclusion and take decisions.
>
> Therefore, despite the extreme difficulty of infiltrating illegals today, the results are worth it. The need for illegals remains acute.[6]

In the face of the Centre's undiminished confidence in the importance of illegals, the Western intelligence officers tasked with hunting them down can be dismissive of their efficacy in our globalised world. Yet they remain in awe of the programme's ambition and are aware of its potential dangers. On a recent summer afternoon, I sat with one such officer, on a park bench in a European capital, and asked him for his views on illegals. He chuckled and raised his brows. 'It's a total waste of time, a

completely pointless waste of resources, an outdated way of spying,' he told me. But then he stopped himself: 'Of course, you just need one of them to succeed, and suddenly it becomes the most dangerous thing imaginable. How are we supposed to find them? How many are still out there? I'll be honest. We don't know.'

KGB Terminology and Structure

KEY TERMS

Centre – foreign intelligence headquarters in Moscow.
Curator – the Directorate S employee with overall responsibility for the training and operations of an illegal.
Dead double – an identity for an illegal taken from someone who died, usually as an infant.
Dead drop – a secluded place where an illegal can drop or pick up a message or package to/from a Line N officer without having to have a personal meeting.
Directorate S – the KGB, and later SVR, illegals division.
False flag recruitment – a technique spies use with targets to disguise their affiliation; for example, a KGB spy might pitch a known right-wing source by claiming to be from the CIA or a right-wing organisation.
GRU – Soviet/Russian military intelligence.
Illegal – a spy who works without diplomatic cover, usually but not always using a false identity and nationality.
INO – the *Innostranny Otdel* (foreign department) of the Cheka, the first Soviet foreign intelligence agency.
Konskvartira – a safe house (literally, ‘conspiratorial apartment’) – an unmarked apartment used by the KGB for operatives to live in or for meetings/training.
Legal residency – the KGB team based in a foreign country, made up of officers under diplomatic cover.
Legal resident – the head of the KGB legal residency in a country.
Legend – the invented backstory given to an illegal by the KGB.
Line N – legal KGB officers posted in foreign embassies and responsible for illegals support work.
Live double – an identity for an illegal taken from someone who is still alive.

Lubyanka – intelligence headquarters in Moscow from 1918 until the present day. Most of KGB foreign intelligence moved to Yasenevo in the 1970s; Directorate S followed in the 1980s.

Politburo – the highest political organ of the Soviet Union, essentially functioning as a cabinet.

SVR – modern Russia's foreign intelligence service.

Yasenevo – headquarters of KGB foreign intelligence, then of the SVR.

BRIEF HISTORY OF THE KGB

Vladimir Lenin set up the Cheka in the weeks after the October Revolution in 1917. In 1920 the Cheka acquired a foreign section, the INO. The Cheka was renamed the OGPU in 1923, and then between 1934 and 1941 was known as the NKVD. The security agency and the foreign intelligence wing of it underwent various name and structure changes over the next decade, until in 1954 it became the KGB. It retained this name until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Then the KGB's domestic functions were handed to a new agency, which became known in 1995 as the FSB. Foreign intelligence was handed to another new agency – the SVR.

STRUCTURE OF THE KGB

The KGB was split up into directorates, with the First Main Directorate responsible for foreign intelligence. Other key directorates included the Second Main Directorate (counterintelligence), the Fifth Directorate (political dissent, set up in 1967), and the Seventh Directorate (external surveillance).

The First Main Directorate (foreign intelligence) was split into further sub-directorates, including the following:

Directorate R – planning and analysis Directorate K – counterintelligence

Directorate OT – operational/technical Directorate T – science and technology espionage Directorate S – illegals

Directorate S (illegals) was split into the following departments during the late Soviet period:

First Department – Flying illegals based in Moscow (previously known as the Seventh Department) Second Department – Documentation and creation of legends Third Department – Selection, recruitment and training Fourth Department – North and South America Fifth Department – Western Europe and the British Commonwealth Sixth Department – Far East

Seventh Department – Northern Africa, Middle East, East Asia Eighth Department – Direct action

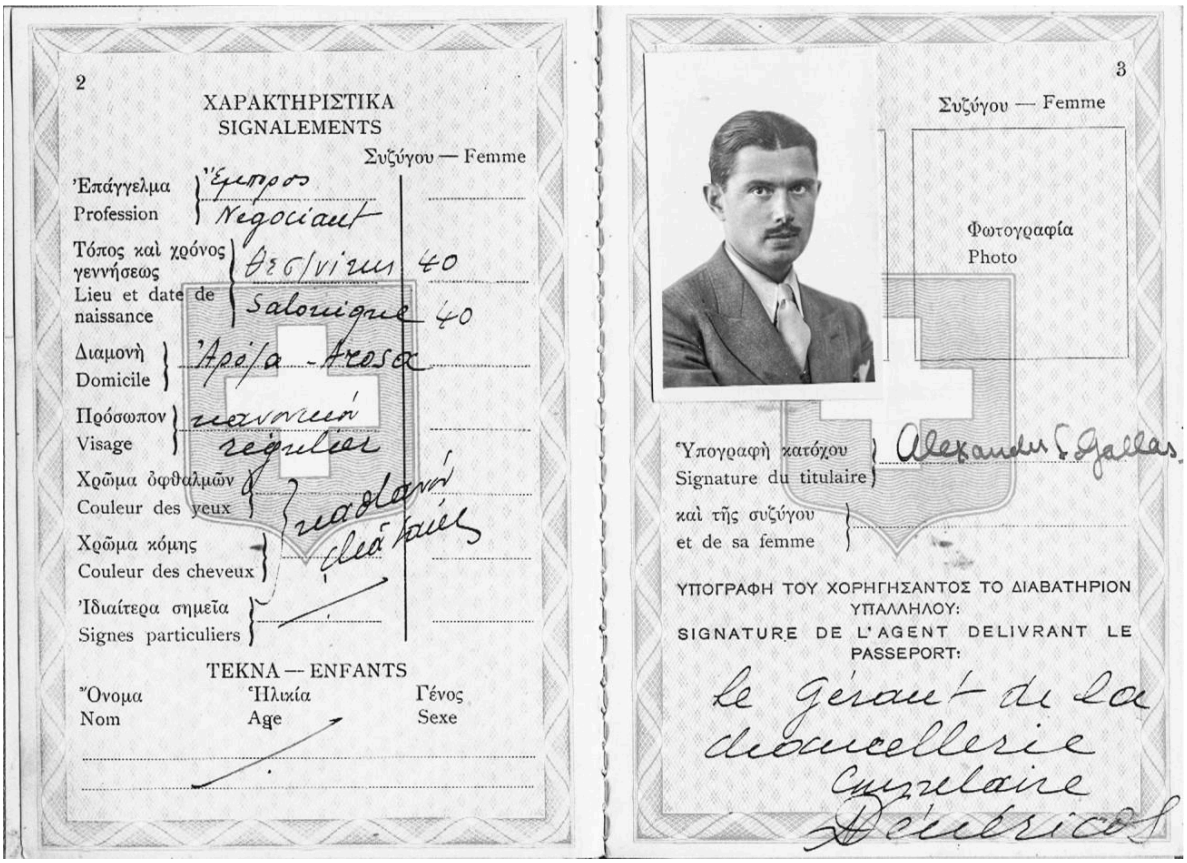
Ninth Department – Internal security Tenth Department – Work on Soviet territory Line N – Illegals support officers placed in Soviet diplomatic and trade missions

An ID card used by Vladimir Lenin while in disguise in 1917, in the name of factory worker Konstantin Ivanov (SCRSS / TopFoto)

Meer Trilisser, first head of Soviet foreign intelligence, in 1927 (Courtesy Olga Zareva)

Meer Trilisser after his 1938 arrest (Courtesy Olga Zareva)

Dmitry Bystrolyotov (Courtesy Sergei Milashov)



2

ΧΑΡΑΚΤΗΡΙΣΤΙΚΑ
SIGNALEMENTS

Συζύγου — Femme

Ἐπάγγελμα / Profession: Ἔμπορος / Negociant

Τόπος καὶ χρόνος γεννήσεως / Lieu et date de naissance: Θεσ/νίκη 40 / Salonique 40

Διαμονὴ / Domicile: Ἀρέα - Arès

Πρόσωπον / Visage: κανονικό / régulier

Χρῶμα ὀφθαλμῶν / Couleur des yeux: μαῦρα / noirs

Χρῶμα κόμης / Couleur des cheveux: ξανθά / blonds

Ἰδιαίτερα σημεῖα / Signes particuliers:

TEKNA — ENFANTS

Ὄνομα / Nom	Ἡλικία / Age	Γένος / Sexe

3

Συζύγου — Femme

Φωτογραφία
Photo

Ὑπογραφὴ κατόχου / Signature du titulaire: Alexandre S. Gallas

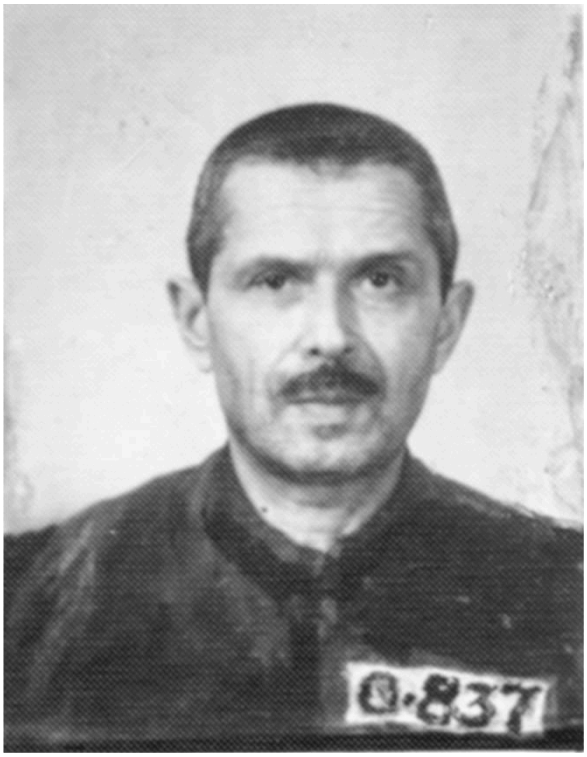
καὶ τῆς συζύγου / et de sa femme:

ΥΠΟΓΡΑΦΗ ΤΟΥ ΧΟΡΗΓΗΣΑΝΤΟΣ ΤΟ ΔΙΑΒΑΤΗΡΙΟΝ ΥΠΑΛΛΗΛΟΥ:
SIGNATURE DE L'AGENT DELIVRANT LE PASSEPORT:

Le Gérant de la
chancellerie
Consulaire
Delbrück

Greek passport in the name of Alexander S. Gallas used by Dmitry Bystrolyotov (Courtesy Sergei Milashov)

Dmitry Bystrolyotov in one of his cover identities (Courtesy Sergei Milashov)



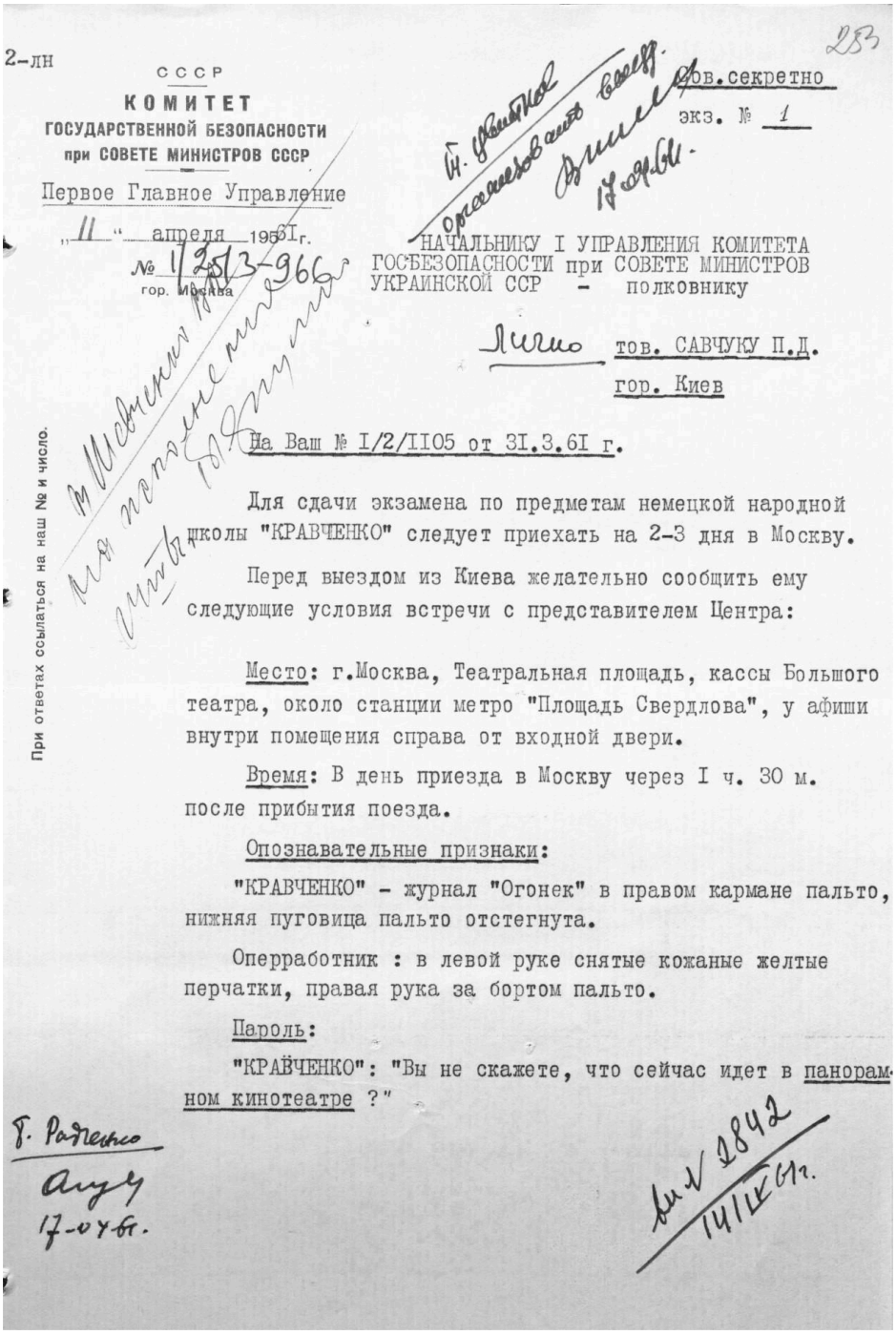
Dmitry Bystrolyotov during his time in the Gulag (Courtesy Sergei Milashov)

Josip Broz Tito (left) meeting with Iosif Grigulevich, in character as Costa Rican diplomat Teodoro Castro, April 1953 (Museum of Yugoslavia)

Yuri Linov and Tamara Kovalenko on their wedding day in Kyiv (Courtesy Yuri Linov)

Yuri Linov with his parents in Kalach on a visit home, year unknown (Courtesy Yuri Linov)

A photo of Yuri Linov (left) in 1966, undercover as Karl-Bernd Motl in Dublin, playing chess with a friend, John Gibson (Courtesy John Gibson)



2-лн

СССР

КОМИТЕТ
ГОСУДАРСТВЕННОЙ БЕЗОПАСНОСТИ
при СОВЕТЕ МИНИСТРОВ СССР

Первое Главное Управление

„11" апреля 1961г.

№ 1/253-966

гор. Москва

283

Особ.секретно

экз. № 1

НАЧАЛЬНИКУ I УПРАВЛЕНИЯ КОМИТЕТА ГОСБЕЗОПАСНОСТИ при СОВЕТЕ МИНИСТРОВ УКРАИНСКОЙ ССР - полковнику

тов. САВЧУКУ П.Д.

гор. Киев

При ответах ссылаться на наш № и число.

На Ваш № I/2/II05 от 3I.3.6I г.

Для сдачи экзамена по предметам немецкой народной школы "КРАВЧЕНКО" следует приехать на 2-3 дня в Москву.

Перед выездом из Киева желательно сообщить ему следующие условия встречи с представителем Центра:

Место: г.Москва, Театральная площадь, кассы Большого театра, около станции метро "Площадь Свердлова", у афиши внутри помещения справа от входной двери.

Время: В день приезда в Москву через I ч. 30 м. после прибытия поезда.

Опознавательные признаки:

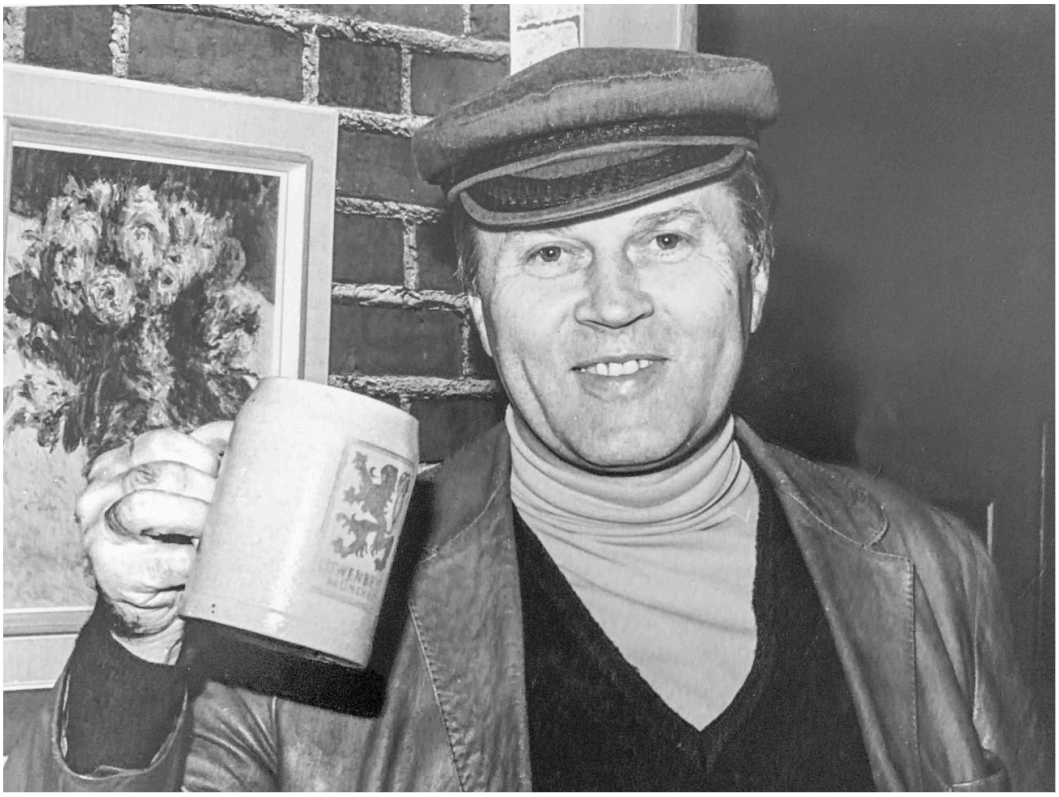
"КРАВЧЕНКО" - журнал "Огонек" в правом кармане пальто, нижняя пуговица пальто отстегнута.

Оперработник : в левой руке снятые кожаные желтые перчатки, правая рука за бортом пальто.

Пароль:

"КРАВЧЕНКО": "Вы не скажете, что сейчас идет в панорамном кинотеатре ?"

A document from Yuri Linov's KGB training file ordering him to Moscow for a German-language test in 1961. It gives the time, place and pass phrases for a meeting, and says the man he was to meet would be holding a pair of yellow leather gloves in his left hand. (Photo SZRU archive)



Rudi Herrmann, mid-1970s, in Hartsdale, New York (Courtesy Elliot Holar)

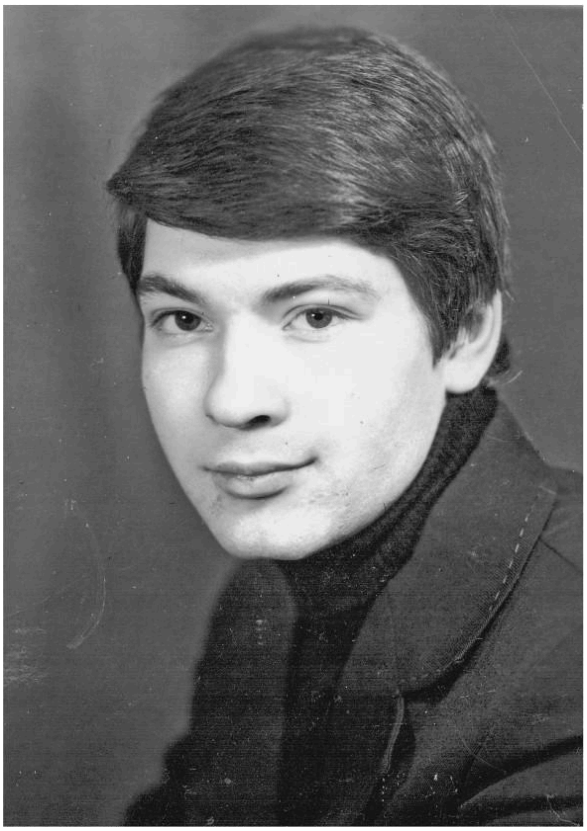
Peter Herrmann during the trip to South America when his father revealed he was a KGB illegal, Tiwanaku, Bolivia, 1974 (Courtesy Elliot Holar)

Yuri Drozdov (front row, third from left) in Kabul to carry out a coup against Afghan president Hafizullah Amin, 1979 (nvdaily.ru / Zuma / eyevine)

Yuri Drozdov, head of Directorate S (1979–1991), at his desk at the KGB foreign intelligence headquarters (nvdaily. ru / Zuma / eyevine)

Vladimir Putin’s pass from his time working for the KGB in Dresden, Germany (BStU Archive)

Elena Vavilova in 1983 (Courtesy Elena Vavilova)



Andrei Bezrukov in 1983 (Courtesy Elena Vavilova)

Andrei Bezrukov, as Don Heathfield, with his sons, Alex and Tim, Niagara Falls (Courtesy Alex Vavilov)

Acknowledgements

I am enormously thankful to all the former illegals who agreed to speak with me, particularly Yuri Linov and his wife, Tamara, who kindly received me in their hometown on two lengthy trips. Thanks also to Elena Vavilova, Jack Barsky, and Wolfhard and Heidi Thiel. Elliot Holar, who was once known as Peter Herrmann, generously agreed to tell his story for the first time. I'm grateful also to Tim and Alex Foley/Vavilov for opening up to me about their childhoods.

I'm greatly indebted to Vasily Mitrokhin for his years of labour, as well as to the historian Christopher Andrew for his earlier work with Mitrokhin's documents. Their work provided an invaluable foundation for this book. My thanks to Allen Packwood, Andrew Riley, and the rest of the staff at the Churchill Archives Centre for their help with the Mitrokhin Archive, including with helping me to access portions of the material that were frustratingly re-closed due to data protection concerns during my research. Jaroslav Vaňous at the Archives of the Czech Security Services in Prague and Dagmar Hovestädt at the Stasi archive in Berlin were helpful. Petr Vojta helped me with the archive of Czech Television. Vasily Maximov helped me access documents on illegals in the Lithuanian KGB archive. The staff of Ukraine's Foreign Intelligence Service located and declassified Yuri Linov's training files remarkably quickly, quite a miracle given there was a war going on.

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For help with contacts and context I want to thank Sanita Jemberga in Riga, Szabolcs Panyi in Budapest, Oleksandr Skrypnyk in Kyiv, Lenka Kabrhelova in Prague, Gustavo Gorriti in Lima, Yossi Melman, Ronen Bergman, and particularly Shlomo Shpiro in Tel Aviv, Marta Allevato in Rome, Christopher Nehring in Germany, Holger Roonemaa in Tallinn, and Marjorie Ross in San José, Costa Rica. Robert Bickers gave me context on 1930s China. In Minsk, the historian Siarhei Novikau was exceptionally helpful with accessing the Belarusian archives. Drazen Jorgic helped arrange a tour of Trotsky's house in Mexico City with Trotsky's great-granddaughter, and also helped track down a lead in Kenya. Ronit Weiss-Berkowitz kindly sent me her two 1990s films about Yuri Linov, and Andreas Dirr sent me a copy of his film about Heidrun Hofer. Viktor Shimolin met me in Minsk to give me a copy of his excellent but hard-to-find book on the assassination of Wilhelm Kube.

Olga Zareva provided documents and photographs relating to her grandfather Meer Trilisser, and Sergei Milashov was kind enough to share the dossiers he built up over years on his step-grandfather Dmitry Bystrolyotov. David Hochman spoke to me about his father and Prague in 1968. The professional sleuth Fyodor Lukyanov helped me to navigate the Russian archives. Viktor and Viktoria Muchnik were warm hosts and helpful guides in Tomsk. Catherine Andreyev, Rachel Applebaum, Trevor Barnes, Laura Browder, Emil Draitser, Mary Allen Johnson, Polly Jones, Peter Löhn, Anshel Pfeffer, Daniela Richterova, Jeff Trimble and Andrei Znamenski advised me on various issues.

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Thanks to my sister, Zareen, and my parents, Nargis and Peter, for all your love and support as well as useful feedback from the draft. Finally, and most importantly, to Paulina: we hadn’t met when I started on this book and were married by the time I finished it. Thanks for living with my illegals obsession for so long and for everything else, now and always.

Notes

Introduction

1. Michael Friscolanti, ‘The Russian Spies Who Raised Us’, *Maclean’s*, 10 Aug. 2017, macleans.ca. The exact scheme through which Vavilova acquired the ‘first documents’ is unclear; she might have started with a KGB forgery of the birth certificate. The full name on the birth certificate, and on ‘Ann’s’ subsequent passport, was Tracey Lee Ann Foley.
2. Interview with Chapman, 2011.
3. Quoted in Andrew and Mitrokhin, *Mitrokhin Archive*, 11.

1. Roots: *The Bolshevik Underground*

1. Trotsky, *My Life*, 142–6; Service, *Trotsky*, 70–71; Rappaport, *Conspirator*, 60–72. The house was destroyed during World War II.
2. McKnight, *Espionage and the Roots of the Cold War*, 23–4, 42.
3. Sebestyen, *Lenin the Dictator*, 123–4.
4. Rappaport, *Conspirator*, 115.
5. Rappaport, *Conspirator*, 158–64.
6. For more detail on Lenin’s strategy of combining the two kinds of work, see Nimtz, *Lenin’s Electoral Strategy.*
7. For Stalin and *konspiratsiya*, see Sebag Montefiore, *Young Stalin*, 98–9, 134, 171, 172–3, 181, 182, 189, 220.
8. McKnight, *Espionage and the Roots of the Cold War*, 49–50.
9. Andrew and Mitrokhin, *Mitrokhin Archive*, 36, 752n.

2. The Old Man: *The First Head of Soviet Foreign Intelligence*

1. Ioganson, *Dorogoi borby*, 33–4; ‘Borba za vlast’, amurobl.ru.
2. Yaroslavsky, *Protokoly.*
3. Primakov, *Ocherki*, 2:50–51; Konyayev, *Shlisselburgskie psalmy*, 594; Ioganson, *Dorogoi borby*, 19.
4. GAIO, F34, Op OTs, D101, File on Meer Abramovich Trilisser, 1914–17.
5. Alexander Barinov, ‘Pervy Chekist Tsentrosibiri’, *Chitinskoe Obozrenie*, 25 Dec. 2017, obozrenie-chita.ru. The claim of torture is at RGASPI, f. 495, op. 65a, d. 11316.
6. See, for example, Ball, *Russia’s Last Capitalists*, 9.
7. RGASPI, f. 485, op. 65a, d. 11316, p. 13.

8. Ioganson, *Dorogoi borby*, 42; interview with Olga Zareva, Trilisser's granddaughter.

9. Andrew and Gordievsky, *KGB*, 41.

10. Much of the detail on Trilisser inside Lubyanka is taken from Agabekov, *Ch.K. za Rabotoi*; these details are from pp. 166–7.

11. McKnight, *Espionage and the Roots of the Cold War*, 48–9.

12. While there were certainly some female Chekists, including those known for cruelty who were used in White propaganda as evidence of the supposed decadence and moral decay of the Bolshevik regime, I could not find data on a gender breakdown for the INO or the Cheka more generally. However, none of the published accounts of the early INO days I came across contained any references to women in the department.

13. Hella Wuolijoki, a Finnish author and poet with whom Trilisser had an affair during his underground days, would often call on her former lover when in Moscow, sometimes bringing other foreigners with her. Another visitor was Nicholas Roerich, the Russian American painter, who had been on a mission to Tibet to search for the mythical city of Shambhala and wanted to place soil from Buddha's birthplace onto the grave of Lenin. See Kuusinen, *Before and After Stalin*, 144; and Andreyev, *Myth of the Masters Revived*, 241, 246.

14. Felshtinsky, *VChK-GPU dokumenty i materialy*, 260.

15. Interview with Olga Zareva. Almost all the initial residents of the building's nine generously sized apartments would be shot in the purges.

16. Primakov et al., *Ocherki*, 2:55.

17. The manual on illegal work as well as minutes of meetings and other information about the Commission on Illegal Work is at RGASPI, f. 495, op. 27, d. 1 and 2.

18. Andrew, *Secret World*, 583.

19. Matonin, *Cherny chelovek*, 363–71.

20. Bessedovsky, *Revelations of a Soviet Diplomat*, 186.

21. See Agabekov, *Ch.K. za Rabotoi.*

3. The Fast Flier: *The Greatest of the Great Illegals*

1. Dmitry claimed he was raised by a woman named Elizaveta de Courval. Draitser, in *Stalin's Romeo Spy*, 19–21, admits that 'some elements of his story are dubious', while Prosvetov, in *Verbovshchik*, 25–7, says there was only one de Courval living in St Petersburg at this time and her name was not Elizaveta. The truth of exactly how Dmitry spent his childhood is likely to remain a mystery.

   On the maritime academy, other accounts speak of Dmitry first attending a naval cadet school in Sevastopol, but seem to be false. See Prosvetov, *Verbovshchik*, 30. He claimed that as part of the town's sentry he took part in Protapov's execution, though this seems likely to be poetic licence. The sunflower seeds quotation is at Prosvetov, *Verbovshchik*, 41.

2. Prosvetov, *Verbovshchik*, 48–9.

3. King, *Midnight at the Pera Palace*, 89–110.

4. Quoted in Prosvetov, *Verbovshchik*, 53. Dmitry returned briefly to Crimea in 1921, a risky move given that his previous service aboard a White ship could have easily led to his arrest. Dmitry also claims he was first recruited by the Cheka on this trip; it's a complicated story clouded by the different versions he told at different times, but the best sleuthing as to the truth is in Prosvetov, *Verbovshchik*, 56–61.

5. There was another mission back to Russia and a very brief stint in Bratislava in between.

6. See Andreyev and Savicky, *Russia Abroad*, 89–92; RGASPI, f. 5765, op. 2, d. 92.
7. Draitser, *Stalin's Romeo Spy*, 54.
8. Strogalova, 'Stanovlenie i nachalny etap'.
9. In 1922, Dmitry had briefly travelled back to Russia, then back to Constantinople and on to Prague. See Milashov, *Commentaries*, vol. 1; Draitser, *Stalin's Romeo Spy*, 46–7.
10. RGASPI, f. R-5574, op. 3, d. 2, 10.
11. Tsarev and West, *KGB v Anglii*, 118.
12. Nikolai Samsonov was the real name of 'Comrade Golst'.
13. Her full name was Maria Milena Iolanta Shelmatova.
14. Degtaryov and Kolpakidi, *Vneshnyaya razvedka SSSR*, 358–60.
15. The available archives and secondary sources don't say whether Bazarov had documents in the name of da Vinci, or if this was a cover only for the benefit of Charlie, or a code name.
16. Tsarev and West, *KGB v Anglii*, 110.
17. He used his Greek passport; travelling to Hungary in character as Perelly could have created awkward situations, given he didn't speak any Hungarian.
18. Presumably, he would have countered by speaking Czech, which he knew well from his time in Prague, and German. But still, a Hungarian living in Habsburg-era Bratislava (then called Pozsonyi/Pressburg) and later moving to Budapest would have certainly spoken fluent Hungarian.
19. Tsarev and West, *KGB v Anglii*, 129.
20. Barratt, *Forgotten Spy*, 60.
21. These details on Lucy from Barratt, *Forgotten Spy.*
22. Tsarev and West, *KGB v Anglii*, 133.
23. See Bazarov's letter to the Centre in Tsarev and West, *KGB v Anglii*, 134. Allegedly, the passport was in the name of Lord Robert Grenville, born in Canada, and was signed by the foreign secretary himself, Sir John Simon, who said, 'I didn't know that Lord Robert was here in Britain again,' as he did so, but there is no evidence to back this up. There also appears to be no copy of the passport in Bystrolyotov's KGB file as copied by Sergei Milashov, while a number of his other passports do survive.
24. West and Tsarev, *Crown Jewels*, 70.
25. Tsarev and West, *KGB v Anglii*, 141–2.
26. Draitser, *Stalin's Romeo Spy*, 85, 108, 138–41.
27. TNA KV 2/808.
28. This does rely on Dmitry's account being accurate, though we know for sure that the lunch did take place, because a wiretap transcript in TNA KV2 /808 records Lucy inviting Kemp to the lunch, and another records Ernest calling Lucy and noting that he had heard she'd had Kemp to visit.
29. Barratt, *Forgotten Spy*, 189.
30. TNA KV2/808.
31. TNA KV2/808.
32. Some authors have noted a line in Dmitry's memoirs, where he wrote 'our wonderful "source" failed and was killed by us' to suggest Oldham's death could have been foul play. However, there is no corroborating evidence for this, and much to suggest Oldham was seriously ill with alcoholism and in deep despair.

33. Nearly two decades later, in light of new information from Soviet defectors and amid the much-changed atmosphere of the Cold War, MI5 reopened the Ernest Oldham case and tried to work out who the elusive Hungarian was, belatedly realising he must have been a Soviet illegal. When questioned, an ageing Thomas Kemp claimed he had no recollection of meeting the man, probably a lie to cover up how he had been so comprehensively duped by the invitation to the Ritz and subsequent escape. Instead, he suggested the investigators should look up Lucy Oldham, who would be sure to remember plenty. But they were a few months too late. In the summer of 1950, Lucy had also taken her own life, jumping into the River Thames. In 1974, more than four decades after Joe Perelly vanished just after the Kensington lunch, the British security services were still trying to assemble clues that might help determine his identity. It was only in the early 1990s, when the Soviet Union collapsed and the name Dmitry Bystrolyotov became public, that the pieces of the puzzle finally fell into place.

34. Tsarev and West, *KGB v Anglii*, 155.

35. TNA KV 2/809 and KV 2/815; Andrew and Mitrokhin, *Mitrokhin Archive*, 64–7; West and Tsarev, *Crown Jewels*, 76–7, 84.

36. Sokolov, ‘A. L. Razumova’; Chase, *Enemies Within the Gates*, 361–8.

37. In conversation with Emil Draitser, quoted in *Stalin’s Romeo Spy.*

38. Many of the interwar intelligence documents were destroyed, meaning that even for those operations where there are documents in the KGB archive (as seen by Emil Draitser and some authors in the early 1990s and reproduced in part in the Mitrokhin Archive), they are largely based on a text Bystrolyotov himself wrote decades later when he was released from the Gulag, rather than on contemporary archival sources.

39. Quoted in Prosvetov, *Verbovshchik*, 108.

4. The Terror: *Stalin’s Purges*

1. Between 1930 and 1936, 2.4 million people were deported as part of anti-kulak operations. Edele, *Stalinist Society*, 42.

2. Quoted in Schlögel, *Moscow, 1937*, 35.

3. Schlögel, *Moscow, 1937*, 46.

4. Jenks, ‘Metro on the Mount’.

5. Schlögel, *Moscow, 1937*, 79.

6. Draitser, *Stalin’s Romeo Spy*, 242–3.

7. RGASPI, f. 17, op. 171, d. 410, l. 255, reproduced at stalin.memo.ru.

8. Vladimir Sergeev, ‘Da Vinci Sovetskoi Razvedki’, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 6 Oct. 2006, nvo.ng.ru; Kim and Kolpakidi, *Vneshnyaya razvedka SSSR*, 358–60.

9. Figes, *Whisperers*, 227–315. She continued turning over these thoughts in her head for the next two years, until she too was arrested and sent to a labour camp as the wife of an enemy of the people. She died there in 1940.

10. Details of the arrest and subsequent interrogation are mainly from Bystrolyotov, ‘Zalog Bessmertiya’, in ‘Memoirs’, bk 1.

11. Milashov, in *Commentaries*, notes that Solovyov was five years older than Dmitry. He had been born into a peasant family and had minimal schooling. He had bounced between a series of menial jobs before he joined the Cheka in 1921 and gradually rose through the ranks. Solovyov survived the purges, but went missing, presumed dead, in the first months of the Soviet war effort in 1941.

12. Andrew and Mitrokhin, *Mitrokhin Archive*, 103.

13. See Jansen and Petrov, *Stalin's Loyal Executioner*, 68. Officially, Russia's SVR claims Slutsky's death was not suspicious, but there is enough circumstantial evidence to assert with reasonable confidence that he was killed.

14. The fishmonger detail is reproduced in numerous Russian sources; the name Ernst Deutschlander is given in MITN 2/9/2, p. 17.

15. Trilisser at this point was using the name Mikhail Moskvin. See Chase, *Enemies Within the Gates*, 240–43.

16. FSB: Protocol of the interrogation of Meer Trilisser (provided by Olga Zareva). Trilisser's confession shows that he tried to retain a scrap of dignity, admitting only to the fact he had unwittingly allowed the INO to become a nest of spies, but resisting to the last the charge (on which he was found guilty) that he had been an active capitalist spy.

17. The older Bolsheviks also remembered that before the revolution their ranks were infiltrated with deep-cover Okhrana agents, including Roman Malinovsky, who for a time was the leader of the Bolshevik faction in the Duma. When Osip Pyatnitsky was arrested in 1937, his wife, Yulia, wondered if maybe all along he had been 'a spy or secret agent like Malinovsky'.

18. Milashov, *Commentaries.*

5. Inroads to America: *The First Illegals in the United States*

1. FBI: Michael Whitney Straight file; Straight, *After Long Silence*, 129; VN White Notebook #3, 115–17. In his memoir Straight claims Green's first contact came when he was already in DC in 1938; in his FBI interview, however, he makes it clear it was in New York, which also fits better with Akhmerov's cables back to Moscow on the subject.

2. Agabekov, *OGPU*, 150.

3. Bessedovsky, *Revelations of a Soviet Diplomat*, 112.

4. Haynes, Klehr and Vassiliev, *Spies*, 196–7.

5. Haynes, Klehr and Vassiliev, *Spies*, 331.

6. 'Recognition of Russia', Hearing before a subcommittee of the Committee on Foreign Relations, US Senate, Government Printing Office, Washington, DC, 1924, 262.

7. Massing, *This Deception*, 132–3; Chambers, *Witness*, chap. 20; Haynes, Klehr and Vassiliev, *Spies*, 406.

8. The defector Walter Krivitsky, when debriefed by the FBI, claimed Markin exchanged $100,000 of counterfeit money for good money with two Chicago gangsters, explaining to them that the notes were 'hot' in New York. When the criminals found out they had been duped, they tracked him down and killed him. Haynes, Klehr and Vassiliev record his death as 'either an accident or a street crime'. FBI 100-11146 Walter G. Krivitsky part 2 of 4 (logged on vault.fbi.gov as Walter Krivitsky part 3 of 8); Haynes, Klehr and Vassiliev, *Spies*, 156.

9. Shalagin, *Vybor rezidenta.* MITN 1/6/2, p. 103, gives the Edir Bey name, while other sources such as Shalagin say Akhmerov used a document in the name of Mustafa Dakmak (or Togmach). I could find no trace of either name in records of Yenching University or Columbia. Russian sources say Akhmerov studied at the 'American University' in Peking; my thanks to Robert Bickers, who suggested this was most likely to be Yenching.

10. Strasbaugh, *Victory City*, 15.

11. Massing, *This Deception*, 68.

12. Sakmyster, *Red Conspirator*, 70–71.

13. Akhmerov's Soviet wife, Natalia, and their son, Robert, were also posted to the United States at the same time, living in the newly opened Soviet embassy, where Natalia worked as a

secretary. It is not clear how often he was able to see them or what kind of relationship they had. In August 1939, Valentina and Robert returned to the Soviet Union by boat, using their own names. Robert later became a KGB agent. There is still tension between the two branches of the family over the issue, according to Akhmerov's Russian biographer.

14. VN White Notebook #3, 116.

15. For Duggan, Iskhak had yet another alias: Alexander Hansen.

16. Moorhouse, *Devil's Alliance*, 5–12. The next day Krivoshein gave an upbeat interview to two German war reporters, toasting Hitler and Stalin as men of the people and inviting the Germans to dinner at his Moscow apartment 'after the victory over capitalist Albion'.

6. Operation Duck: *The Assassination of Leon Trotsky*

1. Sudoplatov, *Special Tasks*, 12–27.

2. Details of this encounter come mostly from Sudoplatov's own account in *Special Tasks*, 65–86.

3. The mention of the Santa Fe safe house is in Sudoplatov, *Special Tasks*, but others have cast doubt on this. The story of the asylum is in Chikov, *Superagent Stalina.*

4. 'Woman Is Accused in Trotsky Murder', *New York Times*, 27 Aug. 1940, 9.

5. The section on Operation Duck is pieced together from Soldatov and Borogan, *Compatriots*, 39–52; Sudoplatov, *Special Tasks*, 65–86; Damaskin, *Stalin i razvedka*, 115–34; Andrew and Mitrokhin, *Mitrokhin Archive*, 112–16, Chikov, *Super-agent Stalina*, 75–6; Volodarsky, *Stalin's Agent*, 359–67; Mercader and Sánchez, *Moi brat ubil Trotskogo*; and Sánchez Salazar, *Murder in Mexico.*

7. Operation Barbarossa: *Hitler Invades the Soviet Union*

1. Matthews, *Impeccable Spy*, 238.

2. Andrew and Mitrokhin, *Mitrokhin Archive*, 122.

3. Matthews, *Impeccable Spy*, 274, 280.

4. Andrew and Mitrokhin, *Mitrokhin Archive*, 119–20.

8. The Whistler: *Undercover Behind Enemy Lines*

1. Much of the material from this chapter, unless otherwise noted, comes from Khokhlov, *In the Name of Conscience*. The detail on the train journeys is from Braithwaite, *Moscow 1941*, 276.

2. Edele, *Stalinism at War*, 82.

3. Edele, *Stalinism at War*, 87.

4. Interview with Evgenia Albats; Evgenia Albats, 'Mama i papa i ikh voina', *Novoe Vremya*, 4 May 2015, newtimes.ru.

5. See, for example, Brilev and O'Connor, *Razvedka: Nelegaly naoborot.*

6. Khokhlov wrote about the mission to Minsk in detail in his memoir *In the Name of Conscience*, but his recollections are often unreliable. The subject is also tricky because Khokhlov, after defecting from the Soviet Union in the 1950s, was written out of the story completely by later Soviet historians. This has led some to surmise that his account of his adventures was completely invented. However, there are two documents from the time that confirm large parts of it and also shed further light. Selemenev and Shimolin's *Ubiistvo Vilgelma Kube* is extremely helpful here, particularly a document reproduced on pages 107–9 with testimony of

Karl Kleinjung from August 1945. I also made use of original documents from the Minsk archives, the most useful of which were NARB, f. 1346, v. 1, sp. 44 and 265. The latter of these is the transcript of an interview with Elena Mazanik made in Lubyanka in October 1943, a much more reliable source than her later memoir.

7. Selemenev and Shimolin, *Ubiistvo Vilgelma Kube*, 15.

8. Selemenev and Shimolin, *Ubiistvo Vilgelma Kube*, 79–80.

9. Selemenev and Shimolin, *Ubiistvo Vilgelma Kube*, 33.

10. NARB, f. 1346, v. 1, sp. 265.

11. That, at least, is the story as it was told later by Nikolai. Elena would later claim she had already received a bomb from her other partisan contacts, and she sent Nikolai packing, still wary of him.

12. Ilya Ehrenburg, 'Konets Vilgelma Kube', *Krasnaya Zvezda*, 24 Sept. 1943.

9. Early Infiltrations: *The Cold War Begins*

1. Downing, *1983*, 41.

2. Walton, *Spies*, 88.

3. When, in 1945, Silvermaster met with a legal officer working undercover as a Soviet news agency correspondent, he felt pleased to be meeting with a Soviet representative, because previously, to his knowledge, he had dealt only with Americans.

4. Walton, *Spies*, 108.

5. Anderson, *Quiet Americans*, 153.

6. Gaddis, *Cold War*, 58.

7. Gaddis, *Cold War*, 39; Weiner, *Enemies*, chaps 17 and 18.

8. Walton, *Spies*, 100.

9. Feklisov, *Man Behind the Rosenbergs*, xvi.

10. MITN 1/6/2 part 1. This was a time of organisational upheaval and reshuffling, including a brief period when military and civilian foreign intelligence were joined into one body.

11. MITN 1/6/2, p. 129; Pavlov, *Operatsiya 'Sneg'*, 124.

12. MITN 1/6/2, pp. 121–2; Andrew and Mitrokhin, *Mitrokhin Archive*, 204–9; Macintyre, *Spy Among Friends*, 134–5, and 152. The account of the heart problems is in Pavlov, *Operatsiya 'Sneg'*, 122–5, in which he also says Makayev had a son in the Soviet Union whom he saw for the first time on his return. Pavlov also claims it was a dead drop made for Makayev by Philby that the illegal did not find.

13. Mitrokhin's notes suggest Brik retrieved the Soboloff document from a dead drop at a public toilet in Montreal, while Brik himself recounted the story of picking up the documents from a handler to his Canadian debriefers in the 1990s. Andrew and Mitrokhin, *Mitrokhin Archive*, 217; Mahar, *Shattered Illusions*, 23–4.

14. The description of the Brik case comes from Mahar, *Shattered Illusions*, which is the comprehensive treatment of the story by Brik's later Canadian handler, as well as Andrew and Mitrokhin, *Mitrokhin Archive*, 217–22.

10. Signor Ambasciatore: *The Mission to Kill Tito*

1. Tito took over a previous royal custom of becoming godfather to every ninth child (the ninth child born to the same mother).

2. Detail of the Castro–Tito meeting is preserved in the Yugoslav archives at AJ KMJ 1 3-b/393.
3. Chikov, *Superagent Stalina*, 14, 417.
4. Primakov et al., *Ocherki*, 4:371–84; MITN 1/6/2, part 1.
5. Nikandrov, *Grigulevich*, 327–42.
6. Nikandrov, *Grigulevich*, 342–3.
7. Gaddis, *Cold War*, 162.
8. Chikov, *Superagent Stalina*, 202.
9. Chikov, *Superagent Stalina*, 218–24; 'Religion: The Nephews', *Time*, 28 April 1958, content.time.com.
10. VAA 1228 B125 fasc. 1, 769–73.
11. NACR; Ross, *El secreto encanto*, 173–5. My thanks to Marjorie Ross, who sent me copies of the Costa Rican archive documents.
12. Quoted in Chikov, *Superagent Stalina*, 424.
13. Levy, *Dolce Vita Confidential*, 226–7.
14. Walton, *Spies*, 133.
15. Ross, *El secreto encanto*, 180–81.
16. Chikov, *Superagent Stalina*, 360, notes that the camera is on display and says it was a gift from Einaudi. However, both MITN 2/14/1 267 and Ross, *Unmasked*, 255, say it came from De Gasperi.
17. See 'Official Records of the Sixth Session of the United Nations, Ad Hoc Political Committee 4th Meeting' for the speech by Martinez Moreno. Castro is mentioned as a member of the delegation in 'Official Records of the General Assembly Sixth Session: Sixth Committee: Legal Questions Summary Records of Meetings 7/11/51–29/1/52'. Later Russian accounts, claiming Iosif himself gave a speech at the request of Acheson, seem to be fabrications. Given they also appear in Mitrokhin's notes on Grigulevich's file, taken from a biographical sketch he wrote in 1980, it seems likely the rumours began with Grigulevich's own imagination.
18. Chikov, *Superagent Stalina*, 424.
19. 'Presentazione delle lettere credenziali da parte di S.E. il Signor Teodoro Castro – Inviato straordinario e Ministro plenipotenziario di Costarica', 14 May 1952, Historical Portal of the President of the Republic, archivio.quirinale.it.
20. Chikov, *Superagent Stalina*, 230.
21. Chikov, *Superagent Stalina*, 349, 361.
22. Quoted in Service, *Stalin*, 592.
23. Chikov, *Superagent Stalina*, 345–7.
24. Based on declassified CIA cables referenced in Mehta, '"Rat Hole to Be Watched"?', 120.
25. AJ KMJ 1 3-b/393.
26. Tito made the visit the next spring, arriving in Britain by boat on his official yacht. In a meeting at 10 Downing Street, he secured Churchill's assurances that a Soviet attack on Yugoslavia would lead to the West intervening on its behalf. See Andrew Harrison, 'A Cold War Visitor in London: Marshal Tito of Yugoslavia', National Archives Blog, 15 March 2018, blog.nationalarchives.gov.uk. By this time, Yugoslavia had also signed the Balkan Pact, a defensive alliance with Greece and Turkey, who were both NATO members, and the country also began to receive American and British weapons.
27. The report from Yugoslavia is at Chikov, *Superagent Stalina*, 351–61.
28. Ross, *Unmasked*, 277–8.

29. The document is cited in numerous places, including in a June 1993 *Izvestiya* article, after it was found in the archive by the historian Dmitry Volkogonov. This translation is taken from 'Soviet Plan to Assassinate Tito', 1 January 1953, online at digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org.

30. Alibek, *Biohazard*, 172–3.

31. Sudoplatov, *Special Tasks*, 335–9.

32. Ross, *El secreto encanto*, 208.

33. See AJ KMJ 1 3-b/393; NACR; Ross, *Unmasked*, 295–6; Chikov, *Superagent Stalina*.

34. Morris, *Price of Fame*, chap. 36.

35. Clare Boothe Luce Papers, box 641, folder 11, LOC.

36. See, for example, VAA 1228 B133, fasc. 1, pp. 5, 615–16. When I visited the Vatican archives, the records of papal audiences from the second half of 1952 and 1953 were yet to be catalogued and opened to researchers, though Russian biographers claim Iosif had up to thirteen meetings with the pope, usually accompanying other dignitaries.

37. MITN 2/10 1.

38. This is recounted by Nikolai Leonov in the introduction to Nikandrov, *Grigulevich.*

11. The Illegals Go Public: *The Abel Trial and the CIA's First Illegals*

1. They had been left there by Iosif Grigulevich, who had been sent to the United States to make the drop a year before he left for Italy.

2. Andrew and Mitrokhin, *Mitrokhin Archive*, 192–5.

3. Andrew and Mitrokhin, *Mitrokhin Archive*, 223–7; 'Hollow Nickel/Rudolf Abel', fbi.gov; Donovan, *Strangers on a Bridge.*

4. Arthey, *Abel*, 175.

5. Frank Gibney, 'Intimate Portrait of a Russian Master Spy', *Life*, 11 Nov. 1957.

6. Information on Fisher/Abel drawn from MITN 1/6, chap. 5, part 1; Andrew and Mitrokhin, *Mitrokhin Archive*, chap. 9; and 'Hollow Nickel/Rudolf Abel'.

7. The Molody files are at TNA KV2/4429-4466. I have also made use of Barnes, *Dead Doubles*, and Corera, *Illegal*, in this section.

8. Both the CIA and Soviet authorities overestimated the potential of NTS, a marginal group that never had any chance of fomenting revolution in the Soviet Union. Moscow was infuriated by the NTS role in preparing illegals for work in the Soviet Union, and in 1954 sent its own illegal to Germany to assassinate Georgy Okolovich, the NTS leader and chief trainer of illegals. This was Nikolai Khokhlov, who during World War II had gone undercover as a Nazi officer to assassinate the governor of Belarus. After the war, he gradually became disillusioned with the Soviet Union and, instead of killing Okolovich, knocked on his door and announced that he had been sent to kill him but was instead surrendering to him. Khokhlov ended up defecting to the United States.

9. CIA AESAURUS AENOBLE, 1:16.

10. CIA AESAURUS AENOBLE, 1:20 and 2:2.

11. Cacciatore, 'Their Need Was Great'.

12. Hutton, *School for Spies*, 54.

12. Origin: *The Recruitment and Training of an Illegal*

1. Smith, *Moscow 1956*, 51–3. Like most Soviet leaders at the time, Khrushchev had actively participated in the purges. He had personally signed off on numerous execution quotas. But with Stalin gone and the danger that people might begin to ask questions about the tyrannical scale of repression at the time, Khrushchev tried to take control of the narrative.
2. SZRU 197/1, p. 13.
3. The protocol of Yuri's testimony about Vorobyov is at SZRU 197/3, p. 35.
4. SZRU 197/3, p. 69.
5. SZRU 197/3, p. 64.
6. SZRU 197/1, p. 14 and 197/1, p. 25. The report notes that in words like *Zeit*and *frei*, Yuri dithered too long on the vowel sound, and he did not differentiate between the *e* sounds in words like *West* and *ersten.*
7. Yuri recounted this story to me during interviews. I later found the detailed surveillance reports and his handwritten account of the day, at SZRU 197/1 p. 103 onwards.
8. The surveillance reports from this trip are at SZRU 197/4, pp. 85–116.
9. SZRU 197/1, p. 253.
10. Yuri's handwritten report from the task is at SZRU 197/1, p. 128.
11. SZRU 197/1, p. 51.
12. SZRU 197/4, p. 200.
13. See MITN 1/6/2, p. 142. The details of the plan to arrest Yuri in Tulchin are at SZRU 197/4, pp. 165–8. The report on his visit to Tulchin is at SZRU 197/4, p. 201. Yuri in interviews recalled the incident but did not know it had been a set-up, though his files show that at the time he had suspicions it might have been.
14. The recording transcripts are at SZRU 197/1, p. 267.
15. There is a great amount of detail on Pracht and the legend at SZRU 197/2. Although Pracht was a German, the KGB gave his story a Soviet twist, to explain Yuri's residual traces of a Russian accent: his father had supposedly died on the eastern front, but the family then ended up living in Uzhhorod, which became part of the Soviet Union after World War II. The Pracht identity had actually been used once before by another illegal in training, code name MURATOV, who for unspecified reasons had been withdrawn from the programme. Yuri met with MURATOV in Odesa prior to his departure to discuss elements of the Pracht identity.
16. Details are at SZRU 197/6, p. 20. The municipal garage building, in Leipzig's Holzplatz, is now a Volkswagen dealership. Nagayev had once been an illegal himself, posted to France together with his wife under the cover of a pair of German music teachers. They had had a child while there, which was given a German name but had died as an infant. The child was buried somewhere in France under a fake name, with no possibility for the parents to see the grave. Yuri only found this out years later, when the two men became friends. In Halle, Nagayev gave nothing away.

    In Yuri's training files, Nagayev is not named, but the code names ARSENAL and ERIK are given.
17. Quoted in Kozovoi, 'Dissonant Voices', 35.
18. SZRU 197/6, pp. 127 and 164–6. A spokesperson for Odinga, contacted in July 2024, declined to answer questions on whether the politician remembered anything about 'Hans Pracht' and their interactions.
19. This scene is drawn from Yuri's own recollections.

13. Matchmaking: *The Search for a Partner and Co-illegal*

1. Andrew and Mitrokhin, *Mitrokhin Archive*, 329, 826–7n33.
2. In his interviews with me, Yuri remembered the name of Svitlana Kvitka and said she had been a university girlfriend whom his handlers had told him to stop seeing because her father was an enemy of the people, and as such she would be unsuitable as a partner. However, his file, at SZRU 197/1/125, tells the story very differently. It seems unlikely that he would have suggested Svitlana again if his own recollection of the incident was correct, so I have stuck with the files over the memory.
3. SZRU 197/1, pp. 388, 412–18, 428.
4. I was not able to corroborate this story beyond Yuri's memories. While he is confident it is accurate, as a precaution I have changed the name, partly to cover any mis-remembrances and partly to avoid causing distress to living relatives who may not know the whole story.
5. The documents in Yuri's KGB personal file on Tamara and her recruitment are patchy, much less detailed than for some of the other women who were considered and rejected, and they suggest she went along willingly and knew everything about what she was being recruited for. Because this is so at odds with the memories of both Yuri and Tamara, and might have been a result of handlers glossing over a tricky situation, I have steered more toward trusting their memories.

14. Infiltration: *Entering the West*

1. Even when I met him in 2020, Yuri had no idea that Motl was a real person. See MfS BV Karl-Marx-Stadt XIV 1880/74; MITN 2/16 500. The illegal couple in East Germany was Valentin and Svetlana Barannik, though there might also have been others. They are noted at MITN 2/16 500 and 545; their real names are given in Andrew and Mitrokhin, *Mitrokhin Archive*, 704.
2. MITN 2/14/1 105.
3. MITN 2/16, 528, 529.
4. MITN 1/7, p. 62.
5. Details of the five cases mentioned are, in order, from MITN 1/6/2 125; 1/5 70-73; 2/16 256 (the name used by the Brazilian has been redacted); source in Ukrainian security services; MITN 1/2, p. 27 (this is Gevork and Goar Vartanyan, whose file notes as copied by Mitrokhin paint a less heroic picture of much of their time abroad than current Russian accounts).
6. The Russian word *protivnik* sits somewhere between 'enemy' and 'adversary'.
7. See, for example, MITN 2/18 69 for a description of one live letter box in West Berlin.
8. Andrew and Gordievsky, *Comrade Kryuchkov's Instructions*, 59–60.
9. I have compiled this from Yuri's recollections, but the exact nature of the choreography also draws on Andrew and Gordievsky, *Comrade Kryuchkov's Instructions*, 59–60.
10. Daly, *Sixties Ireland*, 129.
11. DCC Archive, 1966; interview with John Gibson, 2021.
12. Feeney, *1966*, 196–7.

15. Operation Progress: *Undermining the Prague Spring*

1. Mlechin, *Andropov*, 157; Kirpichenko, *Razvedka*, 156.
2. Sebestyen, *Twelve Days*, 112; Talbott, *Khrushchev Remembers*, 1:418.

3. Neither did his son, who was fifteen at the time; see I. Yu. Andropov, ‘Yu. V. Andropov v dolzhnosti posla vo vremya vengerskikh sobytii’, in Sidorenko, *Andropov v vospominaniyakh i otsenkakh soratnikov i sosluzhivtsev*, 269.

4. Mozokhin, *Politbyuro i organy gosbezopasnosti*, 735–8.

5. Quoted in ‘Aspects of Intellectual Ferment and Discontent in Czechoslovakia’, for the Subcommittee to Investigate the Administration of the Internal Security Act and Other Internal Security Laws of the Committee on the Judiciary of the US Senate, US Government Printing Office, Washington, DC, 1969, 50; see also Gwertzman, *My Memories*, chap. 13.

6. Navrátil, *Prague Spring 1968*, 113–25.

7. Andrew and Mitrokhin, *Mitrokhin Archive*, 327.

8. Dvořáková, Jurová, and Kaňák, *Československá rozvědka a pražské jaro*, 24.

9. Andrew and Mitrokhin, *Mitrokhin Archive*, 329, 826–7n33; MITN 2/16 419. Maria Weber was Galina Linitskaya, notable as one of very few female illegals who worked as an independent operator, rather than placed to support a male agent. ‘Oganes Sarajian’ had lived in Rome between 1949 and 1959, and for the previous nine years had worked in Moscow as a trainer. He was granted a couple of weeks to refamiliarise himself with his old identity and fly to Rome for a reorientation and then to Prague.

10. In Andrew and Gordievsky, *KGB*, 428, it is asserted that a similar tactic was actually used in Budapest in 1956 as well, information sourced to Gordievsky’s memories. This is possible, but Mitrokhin made no notes confirming this, and it has not been repeated elsewhere. Events in 1956 moved much quicker than those in 1968, meaning there might not have been time to get the illegals in place. Additionally, there are files speaking of the 1968 operation as something new that should be learned from.

11. MITN 2/20 93 and 2/9/2 195.

12. MITN 2/16 273.

13. MITN 2/20 203; ‘Tainie sklady oruzhiya na granitse s FRG’; V. Ragulin and I. Chushkov, ‘Avantyuristicheskie plany Pentagona i TsRU’, *Pravda*, 19 July 1968, 4; Andrew and Mitrokhin, *Mitrokhin Archive*, 333; August and Rees, *Red Star over Prague*, 129.

14. MITN 2/19/2, 653.

15. Andrew and Mitrokhin, *Mitrokhin Archive*, 333–4.

16. Dubček, *Hope Dies Last*, 182–7.

17. Tůma et al., ‘(Inter-Communist) Cold War on Ice’, 24.

18. Václav Pacina, ‘Hokejová pomsta za okupaci’, *MF Dnes*, 25 March 2004, idnes.cz.

19. There is a discussion on whether this was a spontaneous event or another planned provocation by security services to ‘prove’ the crowd’s violence. It is hard to draw a firm conclusion either way; see the discussion in Tůma et al., ‘(Inter-Communist) Cold War on Ice’, 25–30; Alvin Shuster, ‘Aeroflot Office Burned in Prague’, *New York Times*, 29 March 1969, 5.

20. MITN 2/20 149 gives Vetrov’s name and patronymic as Dmitry Kirillovich and identifies him as ‘senior assistant to the head of Directorate S, sent to Prague in April 1969 for communicating, managing and coordinating with KGB illegals’. Moscow phone records from the late 1980s show a Dmitry Kirillovich Vetrov living in an apartment block not far from Yasenevo and give his date of birth as 23 February 1918, which would have made him fifty-one at the time he met Yuri. The file at RGVA F. 32922 O.1 Ar Ed. 108 p. 93 (reproduced on the website voenspez.ru) shows that Dimka had a long history of doing KGB dirty work. In 1944, he had been given an award for a mop-up operation in Riga. The award citation noted that he personally uncovered seventeen traitors and twenty-three Red Army deserters, who were presumably shot.

21. MITN 2/20 154; Interview with David Hochman; Jiří Hochman CV, courtesy of University Archives, Ohio State University; Miroslav Sígl, 'Nedokončitelný rozhovor přes oceán', *Listy*, Feb. 2012, listy.cz; Richard Eder, 'Czech Party Paper Links Death of Masaryk to Beria "Gorillas"', *New York Times*, 17 April 1968.

22. Interview with David Hochman; ČT archive file on Milan Futera.

23. I spent a long time trying to track down people with memories of Křížek, or documents about him, but to no avail. However, Yuri was adamant about his memories, and the case is also mentioned in MITN 2/19/2 646 and 2/20 203.

24. Hochman and his family were allowed to leave Czechoslovakia in 1974. They settled in Columbus, Ohio, where Jiří taught journalism at the university. See David Treadwell, 'Exiled Czech Newswriter Is Guest Lecturer at OSU', *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, 13 Oct. 1974, 20; James Breiner, 'Amnesty Battles Told by Writer', *Columbus Dispatch*, 19 Feb. 1979, 11; Michael Grossberg, 'Dissident's "Poor Murderer" Opens Denison Season', *Columbus Dispatch*, 27 Sept. 1990, 2. Hochman's friend Ludek Pachman, a chess player who supported the reforms, was arrested and spent six months in the prison section of a mental hospital, where he sustained head injuries before also being eventually allowed to emigrate. Yuri does not remember meeting Pachman, but Mitrokhin's notes on Yuri's file suggest that he at least passed on information relating to the chess player. See MITN 2/20 154; and Hruby, *Fools and Heroes*, 30.

25. Remnick, *Lenin's Tomb*, 18.

26. MITN 2/9/2, p. 11.

27. MITN 2/16 253. This figure is for 1974, the only year Mitrokhin records a figure. The Seventh Department was reorganised as the First Department at some point between 1974 and 1976.

28. MITN 2/19/2 646 and 2/19/1 121.

29. MITN 1/7, pp. 30–31; Andrew and Mitrokhin, *Mitrokhin Archive*, 466–7, 489, 493. The illegal's name was Igor Voytetsky. Mitrokhin's notes do not say explicitly that Voytetsky was based in Moscow, but they do note he was 'withdrawn' from Belgium in 1963, suggesting that the frequent subsequent travel was done from a Moscow base.

30. See Andrew and Mitrokhin, *Mitrokhin Archive*, 467–8, 472–6.

31. MITN 2/6/1 435; interview with Yuri Linov.

32. For a trip to Prague in 1974, 'Walter Brade' took the train from Moscow to Sofia, where a Line N officer met him and gave him his West German Walter Brade passport, into which the Centre's forgers had carefully inserted German departure and Bulgarian arrival stamps. He then flew to Belgrade, where he went to the Czechoslovak embassy to apply for a visa, and flew from there to Prague. When he left Prague, he flew to East Berlin, where a Line N officer was on hand with Russian documents; he made the switch and then flew back to Moscow. See MITN 2/16 514.

16. The Mobile Resident: *On Assignment in Israel*

1. Andrew and Mitrokhin, *Mitrokhin Archive II*, 222–3. The most infamous of these KGB informers was Marcus Klingberg, an epidemiologist who worked on Israel's bioweapons programme and cooperated with Soviet and East German intelligence for more than three decades, although Klingberg always denied emigrating on the orders of the Soviet security service.

2. Golda Meir, 'Mrs Meir's Moscow Memory', *New York Times*, 30 Dec. 1970, 25.

3. MITN 2/19/2 475.

4. Ivanov, *Ostorozhno: Sionizm!*

5. James Feron, ‘Israelis to Use East Jerusalem for Police Base’, *New York Times*, 2 July 1969, 1; Lawrence Fellows, ‘Jerusalem Arabs Shut Their Shops’, *New York Times*, 31 May 1970, 18; Peter Grose, ‘Jerusalem Arabs’ Moves Show Insecurity During Truce Period’, *New York Times*, 16 Aug. 1970, 7; James Feron, ‘Israelis Build Up on Heels of Occupation’, *New York Times*, 22 Feb. 1970, sec. IR, 47; Norwegian Refugee Council, ‘Legal Memo: The Absentee Property Law and Its Application to East Jerusalem’, June 2017, nrc.no.

6. MITN 1/2, p. 25; ‘Vladimir Lokhov: Polkovnik K. ne znaet, chto takoe proval’, *Diletant*, n.d., diletant.media. Lokhov’s real first name was Murman, an Ossetian name he Russified to fit in better in the KGB.

7. Yuri assumed the money was for Klingberg, though most accounts claim Klingberg was an ideological spy and was not paid.

8. Some details of the trips Yuri made to Israel were clear in his mind, but he could not remember which trip they related to. It is possible that with this, and with other small details, they actually refer to a different trip. Where he could not remember things that would significantly alter the substance of the story, I have noted it, but the reader should be aware that there may be some small inaccuracies in the incidental details.

9. Yuri believed the password Leon used to identity himself was in Russian, but could not remember what it was. Neither Yuri nor the Centre knew he had already spent three years in jail in the 1950s for spying for Syria.

10. Mitrokhin’s files show that Yuri was eventually meant to handle five agents in Israel. However, the only two he met, as far as he could remember, were Petrescu and Leon. MITN 2/16 75, 76.

11. Interview with Yuri Linov; also in Bondarenko, *Yuri Drozdov*, 123–4, there is a reference to the head of Directorate S at this time, without naming Lazarev, as ‘tyrannical and self-obsessed’ – notable in a book that almost entirely eschews criticism of any KGB figures.

12. The word means ‘provinces’, and Yuri claims during his time learning Gaelic in Dublin he learned it could be used as shorthand for ‘Ireland’. An Irish scholar I consulted confirmed the word’s meaning but said he had never heard of anyone use it in this way, so perhaps Hargreaves would have been equally confused even if he had been Irish!

13. Yossi Melman and Dan Raviv, ‘Buying Romania’s Jews’, *Washington Post*, 14 Jan. 1990, washingtonpost.com.

14. In the section on the arrest and interrogation, as well as Yuri’s own memories and the brief Mitrokhin references, I have also used the detailed account using Israeli sources from Haber and Melman, *HaMargalim*, and Shpiro, ‘Soviet Espionage in Israel’.

15. I was not able to find anything out about Hargreaves, beyond Yuri’s memories.

16. According to Israeli accounts, they brought vodka and caviar, to lure their captive into admitting his Russianness and also to put him at ease and show he would be treated with respect.

17. Lots, *Champagne Spy*; Ronen Bergman, ‘Isaac Shoshan, Israeli Spy Who Posed as an Arab, Is Dead at 96’, *New York Times*, 5 Jan. 2021, nytimes.com; Andrew and Mitrokhin, *Mitrokhin Archive II*, 226–7.

18. MITN 2/16 482 and 536.

19. This story is recounted in Gordievsky, *Next Stop Execution.*

20. MITN 2/10 237 notes that the KGB believed he broke down too easily. Zakharov biography is at ‘Zakharov Sergei Vasilievich’ on shieldandsword.mozohin.ru.

17. The Baron von Hohenstein: *Undercover in West Germany*

1. *Yulian Semyonov: On slishkom mnogo znal*; Lovell, 'In Search of an Ending'; de Keghel, '*Seventeen Moments of Spring*, a Soviet James Bond Series?'; KGB officers have denied in interviews that Semyonov was a KGB agent, but MITN 1/9/2 106 lists him as an agent of the Second Directorate, who gave info on contacts he had in Spain and had the Stierlitz-inspired code name ISAYEV.
2. An interesting comparison is *The Man in Plainclothes*, which hit Soviet cinemas earlier the same year. The action-packed film, full of leather-clad Nazis and dramatic car chases, was loosely based on Dmitry Bystrolyotov's work in Nazi Germany, and the former illegal was a script consultant and even had a cameo in the film, released shortly before his death. The swashbuckling main character has a perfectly trimmed moustache, sharp suits and a Bond-like smirk as he seduces women. The film saw moderate success but had nothing like the cultural resonance of *Seventeen Moments of Spring*.
3. *First Person*, 22. Putin in this passage actually names another spy movie of the time, *The Sword and the Shield.*
4. CIA, Heinz Felfe Damage Assessment, 7 Feb. 1963, released as part of Felfe, Heinz Damage Assessment Report, and available at cia.gov.
5. Wolf, *Man Without a Face*, 135–65; Linda Pressly, 'The Spy Who Loved Her', *Guardian*, 18 Nov. 2004, theguardian.com.
6. They had already run one ill-fated Romeo operation beginning in the late 1950s, against Leonore Heinz, secretary to a department head in the West German Foreign Ministry. However, this used a West German agent as the Romeo, not an illegal. See Andrew and Mitrokhin, *Mitrokhin Archive*, 581–3.
7. MITN 2/16 139; Andrew and Mitrokhin, *Mitrokhin Archive*, 585.
8. Bondarenko in *Yuri Drozdov* quotes a source saying the reason they went after Hofer was that she worked for Gehlen's son-in-law, who was receiving more documents than a person of his rank would normally receive due to his personal connections. The confirmation that Dürrwanger headed the Paris bureau comes from Jost Dülffer, *Geheimdienst in der Krise: Der BND in den 1960er Jahren* (Berlin: Ch. Links, 2018), 148, 227, 486n (with thanks to Christopher Nehring for finding the source).
9. Donovan, *Strangers on a Bridge*, 385.
10. Drozdov claimed this was the Hotel Astoria on Avenida el Sol, though there is no evidence of either the hotel or the street existing in Lima in the 1970s. It's possible Drozdov confused the hotel name, or the city, or – more likely – invented something to cover where he really went.
11. I have put this story together from a variety of sources. One note of caution: Mitrokhin's notes confirm that a 'special agent' with the code name MAZON made the approach to Hofer as the father of ROLAND (Puschke). This is strange, because Drozdov was not a 'special agent', but it is possible his real identity was masked in the file or that Mitrokhin made an error in transcription. Drozdov, while certainly not above outright inventions, has spoken about the role with such pride and such detail in television documentaries, and multiple pages are also devoted to it in Bondarenko's book, that it seems reasonable to conclude he really was the man behind the role. Hofer, in the documentary *Operation Skorpion*, also tacitly identifies Drozdov as Hohenstein. As well as Drozdov/'Mazon', Mitrokhin's notes at MITN 2/16 61 record that another illegal, a Soviet German, met with Hofer claiming to be part of the organisation. Bondarenko in *Yuri Drozdov*, 127, also mentions 'another illegal' involved. MITN 2/6/1 20, 2/18 385; Andrew and Mitrokhin, *Mitrokhin Archive*, 585–6; Bondarenko, *Yuri Drozdov*, 117–33; *Operation Skorpion – eine Frau im Visier des KGB.*

12. Boris Krotkov, ‘Ya prinimal u agenta prisyagu na vernost Fyurera’, interview with Yuri Drozdov, *Rossiiskaya gazeta*, 31 Aug. 2007, rg.ru; Jan Ludwig, ‘Zittern in Pullach’, *Focus*, no. 34 (1995), focus.de; ‘Großer Appetit’, *Der Spiegel*, 2 July 1979, spiegel. de; ‘Gesucht: Moskaus Mann in Pullach’, 29 March 1998, spiegel. de; Drozdov, *Vymysl Isklyuchen*, chap. 8. The documents seen by Mitrokhin record the Hofer case and other Romeo cases but contain nothing about D-104.

13. *Operation Skorpion – eine Frau im Visier des KGB.* Some German sources suggest that from at least 1973 Hofer must have known she was working for East Germany or Moscow. However, in the one interview she gave, in the 2009 documentary above, she gave a very convincing impression of someone who was devastated by the betrayal and did not suspect the Eastern connection.

14. Alfred Dürrwanger page at the website tracesofwar.com, with primary sources noted as Franz Thomas and Günter Wegmann, *Die Ritterkreuzträger der Deutschen Wehrmacht, 1939–1945* (Osnabrück: Biblio Verlag, 2000), and *Die Ordensträger der Deutschen Wehrmacht’*, CD (Osnabrück: VMD-Verlag GmbH, 2002).

18. The Main Enemy: *Spying on the Americans*

1. MITN 1/6/1, pp. 71, 77G.

2. MITN 1/6/1, pp. 47–8.

3. Wynne was swapped in 1964 for Konon Molody, the illegal caught in Britain.

4. Edbrook, ‘Principles of Deep Cover’.

5. MITN 1/6/2, p. 23, 2/9/1, p. 15, 2/19/1 158, 2/19/2 434, 454; also Andrew and Mitrokhin, *Mitrokhin Archive*, 252–3. Mitrokhin’s files do not note the nationality or name of Blyabin’s wife, only her code name, LENA. Blyabin worked on Progress operations in Hungary, Romania and Yugoslavia in the guise of a West German photographer.

6. MITN 1/6/2 125–127; Andrew and Mitrokhin, *Mitrokhin Archive*, 253–5. Andrew and Mitrokhin note that Rudenko was ‘interrogated under torture’, though Mitrokhin’s original note of Rudenko’s file says only that there was an *opros s pristrastiem*, which suggests intense questioning but not necessarily violence. The file as noted by Mitrokhin states that her parents thought he was a spy for East Germany; it does not specify whether he told his wife he actually worked for the KGB or whether she also believed he was working for the East Germans.

7. MITN 1/6/2, p. 123; Andrew and Mitrokhin, *Mitrokhin Archive*, 238–9. The notes Mitrokhin took on the couple record neither their real names nor any more information about their work in the United States or Köhler’s family in Moscow.

19. The Inheritor: *The Attempt to Create a Second-Generation Illegal*

1. Most of this chapter comes from my interviews with Elliot Holar, but I have also used a little dialogue and some information from John Barron’s interviews with Rudi Herrmann in *KGB Today*, 330–72.

2. MITN 1/6/2, p. 47; Andrew and Mitrokhin, *Mitrokhin Archive*, 257.

3. Heaps, *Hugh Hambleton, Spy*, chaps 5, 6, 7; Barron, *KGB Today*, 327–9; Andrew and Mitrokhin, *Mitrokhin Archive*, 219–20, 250, 259–60; interviews with Elliot Holar. The recollections of Hambleton (as per Heaps, *Hugh Hambleton, Spy*) and Rudi Herrmann over how their first meeting went down, who took the initiative, and whether they met for a coffee,

then dinner (Hambleton) or a beer (Herrmann) vary considerably. There is also a discrepancy on the dates: Herrmann says December 1967; the Heaps book says April.

4. Barron, *KGB Today*, 336.

5. This, at least, is what Drozdov claims in his memoirs.

6. Kirpichenko, *Litsa*, 149.

7. Martynov, *Yavka v Kopengagene*, 18.

8. One such story was relayed by a former KGB source in Moscow of a revelation made during a boat journey from Copenhagen. Also see MITN 2/16 449 for an illegal couple who told their two children born abroad when on the train home from Berlin. The file notes that 'the boy began crying and lay on the bed, repeating the same thing: that he wants to go home and he won't go anywhere else'.

9. There are two other documented cases of the children of illegals going on to become illegals themselves. The first was Galina Linitskaya, who posed as a Swiss sympathiser of the Prague Spring during Operation Progress. Her father was the illegal Leonid Linitsky; however, he died in 1954, and it does not appear that the pair worked abroad together or that she built up her legend during a whole childhood in the West. Her KGB file, as per Mitrokhin, notes that she tried to commit suicide during the early 1970s, but the details are sparse. I contacted her nephew Leonid Golovko, who is a law professor at Moscow State University, but he refused to speak to me. The second case was Klementy Korsakov; in 1953, his mother took him, aged five, to West Germany, where they posed as East German refugees and were eventually naturalised as West Germans. His mother died in 1971, after which the eighteen-year-old Klementy entered art school in Vienna while being trained for illegal work at the same time. He even made two trips to the United States, possibly ahead of being posted there. However, whether for personal or ideological reasons, Klementy had no desire to work as an illegal and attempted to defect to the United States. Mitrokhin's notes claim Klementy walked into the US embassy in Moscow in 1980 to give up the information, but David Rolph, who was in the CIA station at the time, cannot recall this. It seems likely he entered a US embassy elsewhere, or perhaps spoke to the Americans when inside the United States. Mitrokhin's notes say the KGB seized him in Moscow, interrogated him, and then interned him in a psychiatric institution. I have not been able to find any trace of him more recently.

10. Barron, *KGB Today*, 342–3.

11. Barron, *KGB Today*, 348.

12. Mitrokhin's notes record that the address belonged to a Spanish businessman who had emigrated after the Civil War and had cooperated with the KGB since 1950. MITN 2/9/2, 58.

13. Not Chinese, as was used in Barron, *KGB Today*, to help obscure Peter's background.

14. Earley, *Comrade J*, 17; Michael Hinman, 'A Quiet Giant, Hiding in North River-dale History', *Riverdale Press*, 17 May 2020, riverdalepress.com.

15. The FBI to this day has not officially confirmed the Sigler story, though fragments are told in West, *Illegals*, and Croson, Trento and Trento, *Widows.* Sigler committed suicide, and there is some controversy about exactly how the operation went down. Sources that happily spoke about other aspects of the Rudi Herrmann case would not be drawn out on Sigler.

20. Diminishing Returns: *The KGB Keeps Going*

1. Barsky, *Deep Undercover*; various interviews with Barsky, 2016–21.

2. The Linitskaya and Gordievsky cases are noted in Mitrokhin's documents, while the Zhan Didenko case is alluded to in various articles and was also recounted to me by Yuri Linov.

3. Kryuchkov, *Lichnoe delo*, 109.
4. MITN 1/7, p. 61.
5. MITN 2/16/1 23, 2/27 59, 1/7, p. 27.
6. MITN 2/19/1 1-10, 13, 20, 21, 258. Story of the defection is from a former FBI source.
7. MITN 2/26, p. 47, and item 308, 2/19/2 646.
8. MITN 2/20 60–61 and 77–8; 2/20 345.
9. See MITN 2/26, p. 47, and item 308, 2/19/2 646; MITN 2/16 318, 2/19/1 222, 2/20, 65 and 83.
10. Benjamin Cunningham, 'How a Czech "Super-spy" Infiltrated the CIA', *Guardian*, 30 June 2016, theguardian.com; Andrew and Mitrokhin, *Mitrokhin Archive*, 261–3.
11. See, for example, MITN 1/6/2, p. 144, also confirmed by a former FBI source. At least thirteen of these illegals were sent in the late 1970s, though there is no information on whether they were operative in any way or broke contact with the KGB as soon as they left the Soviet Union. (See MITN 1/6/2 144, 145.) Yuri Linov also explained how he was involved, after his return to Kyiv, in 'preparing' Soviet Jews before they immigrated to Israel, though he suspected that most of these people were agreeing to cooperate purely so they would be allowed to leave, and might not have planned to work for the KGB when they arrived.
12. Andrew and Gordievsky, *Comrade Kryuchkov's Instructions*, 54–6.
13. Kryuchkov, *Lichnoe delo*, 83. See also Shevchenko, *Breaking with Moscow*, 302, for another, similar scene.
14. The long-standing ambassador in Washington, Anatoly Dobrynin, was a rare exception.
15. Shevchenko, *Breaking with Moscow*, 311.
16. Drozdov, *Vymysl Isklyuchen*, chap. 6.

21. Eleven Days in Kabul: *The Birth of the 'Fighting Illegal'*

1. Asked by an earnest interviewer late in life which books he had read to his two sons as they grew up, he responded, 'I took no part in their upbringing. I was busy.' For his wife of several decades, he had the following telling compliment: 'She is able to stay silent, to be patient in stressful situations, and to limit her own life in many ways due to my work.'
2. Kouzminov, *Biological Espionage*, 33; Bondarenko, *Yuri Drozdov*, 258.
3. Grau, 'Takedown of Kabul', 291.
4. Braithwaite, *Afgantsy*, 73–6.
5. MITN 1/2, p. 26, 2/19/2 409, 2/27 400, and 2/24 86. The spelling of Talybov's earlier cover identity is given two ways. It could be Ikhtiyar Rosht or Ikhtar Resht.
6. Andrew and Mitrokhin, in *The Mitrokhin Archive II*, say there is no information in Mitrokhin's notes about Talybov after the mid-1970s. However, Mitrokhin on page 77 of his 'KGB in Afghanistan' notes that an interpreter, 'M. Talybov', flew into Kabul on 13 September with a Directorate S delegation.
7. Andrew and Gordievsky, *Mitrokhin Archive II*, 401; Lyakhovsky, 'Inside the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan and the Seizure of Kabul', 33. Asadullah Amin returned to Kabul after the change of regime and was executed.
8. See, for example, Kurilov, 'My byli pervymi', chap. 1, in Drozdov et al., *Afgan, snova Afgan.*
9. Kurilov, 'My byli pervymi', chaps 4, 5, 7, in Drozdov et al., *Afgan, snova Afgan.*
10. Kurilov, 'My byli pervymi', chap. 2, in Drozdov et al., *Afgan, snova Afgan.*
11. Kurilov, 'My byli pervymi', chap. 39, in Drozdov et al., *Afgan, snova Afgan.*

12. Accounts differ on whether the Zenit and Grom troops found out about the operation on the evening of the twenty-sixth or only on the twenty-seventh.

13. Despite accounts from the early 1990s claiming the goal was only to seize Amin rather than to kill him, it seems fairly clear the order was to liquidate him. See, for example, the discussion in Koshelev, *Shturm Dvortsa Amina*, 316–27, as well as numerous accounts from special forces troops who took part.

14. Kuzichkin, *Inside the KGB*, 318.

15. This is the figure given by Braithwaite; Mitrokhin writes that 'over 100' KGB men were killed in the attack on the palace.

16. Braithwaite, *Afgantsy*, 113.

17. On Talybov: Shebarshin, Drozdov and Kryuchkov at various times all alluded to Talybov's mission, though without any specifics. Kryuchkov in his memoirs claimed the goal was only to drug Amin, but this seems unlikely. Bondarenko, in *Yuri Drozdov*, quotes an unnamed source saying 'only Drozdov' knew about the illegal, with the over-secrecy of the plan resulting in its failure. However, it seems likely that Kirpichenko, who had run Directorate S until two months previously, would also have known about the operation. Neither man ever spoke or wrote about having any contact with Talybov while in Kabul. Drozdov, when asked in a 2009 interview about rumours of an agent inside and a poisoning, denied he had anything to do with it, but also allowed that 'it was quite possible' that there had been a poisoning. 'As for what happened inside, who made the bad pilaf, let those who organised it deal with that,' he said. This could suggest that the operation was planned under Kirpichenko, and Drozdov was not part of the operative planning. (Pavel Yevdokimov, 'Pomni Afganistana', interview with Yuri Drozdov, *Spetsnaz Rossii*, Jan. 2009, specnaz.ru.) Vladimir Kuzichkin in *Inside the KGB*, 315–18, named Talybov and gives details of his apparent mission. Kuzichkin offers a few more details in Barron, *KGB Today*, 14–15. Although many details of Kuzichkin's account of other events in Kabul are plainly wrong, he was writing before any of the testimony became public, and he claims to have heard the stories of the poisonings from Talybov himself. Given Talybov had Iranian cover and Kuzichkin worked in Tehran, this is plausible, especially given the fact that he also gave Talybov's name long before anyone spoke publicly of a potential palace poisoner and before Mitrokhin's notes mentioning Talybov came to light. It is unsurprising that he would have heard only unreliable accounts of the rest of the storm. The detail of the Vietnam posting comes from an intelligence source. Moscow phone records show that in the 1990s Talybov was living in a sixteen-storey apartment building near the foreign intelligence headquarters at Yasenevo. One of his sons, as of 2013, was working as a 'consular official' at the Russian embassy in Laos. Another, Azer Talybov, was Russia's deputy economy minister from 2017 until 2020. He declined to speak with me.

22. The Threat of War: *Rising Tensions and New Illegals*

1. *ZSN*, 18 Nov. 1982; interview with Elena Vavilova and interviews with contemporaries of Elena's in Tomsk who watched the speech.

2. The Artek memory comes from posts on Elena Vavilova's Instagram page.

3. Kryuchkov, *Lichnoe Delo*, 205.

4. Gaddis, *Cold War*, 217–25.

5. Downing, *1983*, 54.

6. Downing, *1983*, 14.

7. *ZSN*, 10 and 17 Dec. 1981.

8. Interview with Stanislav Vavilov, Elena's father, 2021.

9. *ZSN*, 12 May 1983.

10. Interview with Viktor Muchnik, Tomsk, 2020.

11. He mentions this with certainty in ‘Chas Speak’, interview with Andrei Bezrukov, RTVi.

12. Interview with Stanislav Vavilov, 2021.

13. While Tomsk opened up after the Soviet Union collapsed, Tomsk-7, which was renamed Seversk in the 1990s, remains closed to non-residents, as do many other towns where sensitive industries are located.

14. Kryuchkov, *Lichnoe Delo*, 209–10.

15. See Schattenberg, *Leonid Brezhnev*, 403.

16. MITN 2/27 243. One illegal reported back from Bulgaria that there was widespread dislike of Soviet demands on the country and noted that ‘everyone is unhappy but stays quiet because they’re scared of the state’.

17. MITN 2/22 289, MITN 2/19/2 646, MITN 2/9/2, p. 195.

18. Kouzminov, *Biological Espionage*, 106. It should be noted that a chemist I spoke to who worked on these drugs in post-Soviet Russia expressed doubt there were such substances that could be administered in a drink, believing they would only work if injected.

19. MITN 1/7, chap. 8.

20. The details are from Kouzminov, *Biological Espionage.* Kouzminov, who now lives in New Zealand, declined to answer my follow-up questions about his account.

21. This detail, like a few in this section, is from Heidi and Wolfhard Thiel, who were trained as illegals for dispatch to the United States roughly three years before Elena and Andrei.

22. This episode is described in Vavilova’s book, and the city is given as Prague. She confirmed to me that the trip did take place, but would not say if it was to Prague or another Communist, Central European capital city. Heidi and Wolfhard Thiel, who trained three years earlier, were sent on a trip to Budapest, and the detail about striking up conversations with Americans is taken from their memories. Assignments were likely to have been very similar.

23. This is from Vavilova’s lightly fictionalised account of her training, so may be inaccurate in places. (Vavilova, *Zhenshchina*, chap. 7.) In an email to me, Vavilova wrote, ‘We did spend some time in such house outside the city. It was as I described it – full of foreign magazines, movies and gadgets.’

23. The End: *The Collapse of the Soviet Union*

1. Kryuchkov, *Lichnoe delo*, 213.

2. Cherkashin, *Spy Handler*, 194, 202.

3. Earley, *Comrade J*, 71. Both sides liked to paint their own double agents as venal losers and those from the other side as principled and brave. According to Kryuchkov, Soviets who went over to the other side were those ‘with moral defects, often prone to alcohol abuse, greedy and able to live double lives’, while people like Ames were ‘people of deep conviction, true to their ideals which matched with the ideology and policies of the Soviet state’. In his foreword to the defector Vladimir Kuzichkin’s 1990 memoir, the novelist Frederick Forsyth calls British defectors to the Soviet side ‘often flawed, losers, cranks, no-hopers’, while Soviet defectors to the West were ‘the *crème de la crème*’ and simply disillusioned with the KGB. It is fair to say that there was much more horror in the KGB to be disillusioned by, but nevertheless defectors from both sides were usually intelligent, complicated and tricky personalities, rather than black-and-white good or evildoers.

4. MITN 1/2, p. 13; Andrew and Gordievsky, *KGB*, 634–5.

5. Interview with Heidi and Wolfhard Thiel, Berlin, 2021. The only time the Centre asked them to perform a task was when Bob reported that there was a mysterious room in the New York Public Library that was always locked. The Centre asked him to find out what secrets it held. Bob created a deliberate malfunction in the phone line going to the room and was then able to gain access to fix it. There turned out to be no great secrets inside. The room housed old and delicate manuscripts that needed to be kept in a controlled temperature and humidity, hence the restricted access. That was the sum total of the espionage carried out by the two illegals in four years of living in the United States.

6. Remnick, *Lenin's Tomb*, 50.

7. Interview with David Rolph, CIA station chief in East Berlin, 1988–91, Washington, DC, 2021.

8. Vladislav Kramar, 'Gruppa v Dresdene byla nebolshaya no moshchnaya', *Voenno-Promyshlenny Kurier*, 14 Dec. 2005, vpk-news.ru. Some authors have imparted a more sinister and long-term agenda to the meeting between Drozdov and Putin, but on the available evidence it seems most likely that the primary concern at hand was destroying sensitive files.

9. Interview with Wolfhard and Heidi Thiel.

10. Both Drozdov and Kryuchkov refer to this letter in their memoirs. In Bonda-renko's *Yuri Drozdov*, Shevchenko is named as the letter's author.

11. This is referenced in Kouzminov, *Biological Espionage*.

12. Kouzminov, *Biological Espionage*, 131.

13. Bakatin, *Izbavlenie ot KGB*, 39–42, 86.

14. Interview with Elena Vavilova; speech given by Andrei Bezrukov in Moscow, 2016; *Nightline*, 25 Dec. 1991; George W. Bush, 'Address on Gorbachev Resignation', 25 Dec. 1991, c-span.org.

15. MITN 2/16 506.

16. The intelligence service of the country in question quietly sent a high-ranking officer on a mission to track down these illegals and tell them they had to return home. A soon-to-be NATO member state could hardly have illegal operatives living undercover in other NATO countries. At least one of these illegals, horrified at this intrusion from his long-forgotten life, told the unwanted visitor to get stuffed. The illegal liked his new life, had a family that knew nothing of his Eastern bloc origins, and said archly that he doubted the bosses back home would want to publicise the fact that the country had 'lost' an illegal inside a NATO member state for the past decade. After a tense meeting of intelligence chiefs back in the home capital, it was reluctantly agreed that the illegal could continue to live in his false identity. The government in question never disclosed the affair to its NATO allies. Interview with intelligence source.

17. The information on York comes from an interview with Eric Kam, who was an assistant professor in the economics department at roughly the same time.

18. Stella Rimington, 'The Spy Who Went into the Cold', book extract published in the *Guardian*, 12 Sept. 2001, theguardian.com.

19. Earley, *Comrade J*, 155.

20. 'Vyacheslav Trubnikov: Ya gord, chto SVR pomogla razvernut vneshnii kurs Rossii', interview with Vyacheslav Trubnikov, RIA Novosti, 25 April 2019, ria.ru.

21. Recounted in Corera, *Russians Among Us*, 44–5.

22. See, for example, Walton, *Spies*, 418.

23. Earley, *Comrade J*, 155–8.

24. Cherkashin, *Spy Handler*, 289.

25. Bondarenko, *Yuri Drozdov*, 354; Harrison Smith, 'Yuri Drozdov, Soviet Spymaster Who Planted Agents Across the West, Dies at 91', *Washington Post*, 21 June 2017, washingtonpost.com.

26. Interviews with fellow students carried out during the research for this book.

27. I conducted interviews with five contemporaries of Andrei from the course; this anecdote was recalled by one of them.

24. Stierlitz Takes Over: *The Rise of Vladimir Putin*

1. Walker, *Long Hangover*, 12.

2. Sergei Pugachev, quoted in Belton, *Putin's People*, 138.

3. Myers, *New Tsar*, 74; Ostrovsky, *Invention of Russia*, 246–8.

4. Ostrovsky, *Invention of Russia*, 248; Peter Pomerantsev, 'Overt Ops', *London Review of Books Blog*, 29 Dec. 2020, lrb.co.uk.

5. Myers, *New Tsar*, chap. 2.

6. Anna Pyartulyainen, '"Prishli na obysk parni, u odnogo familiya Putin' – Istoriya khudozhnika Yuliya Rybakova', *Bumaga*, 7 Dec. 2022, paperpaper.io.

7. Usoltsev, *Sosluzhivets*, 71. Numerous authors have noted the lack of prestige that being posted to Dresden suggested. For suggestions Putin was actually involved in preparing acts of terrorism in East Germany, see Belton, *Putin's People*, 35–7; 'Putin rasskazal o nelegalnoi razvedke i svoei rabote v KGB', RIA Novosti, June 24, 2017, ria.ru.

8. Usoltsev, *Sosluzhivets*, 109–10.

9. Gessen, *Man Without a Face*, 70, 97; Belton, *Putin's People*, 24, 44; Kramar, 'Gruppa v Dresdene byla nebolshaya no moshchnaya'.

10. Soldatov and Borogan, *New Nobility*, 4.

11. Krotkov, 'Ya prinimal u agenta prisyagu na vernost Fyurera'.

12. He subsequently returned to China and held high-level banking roles until he was arrested in an anti-corruption crackdown in 2015.

13. Colin Freeze, 'At Harvard, Alleged Spy Hosted a Scotch Drink-Up', *Globe and Mail*, 30 June 2010, theglobeandmail.com.

14. This is made clear in Strzok, *Compromised.*

15. The description of the SVR residency is from Earley, *Comrade J*, 21–3.

16. Renzo Giner Vasquez, 'Vida, misterio y muerte de Juan Lázaro, el espía de la KGB con pasaporte peruano', *El comercio*, 7 May 2022, elcomercio.pe.

17. MITN 2/22, 99, has details of the couple. It only gives code names for the couple, VOLF and VIKA, but the information makes it clear that it refers to Lazaro and Peláez. It should also have been plenty to bring the FBI onto Lazaro's trail once it had access to the Mitrokhin files in the mid-1990s.

18. The Mitrokhin file notes that the Line N residency in Lima was working to 'create the conditions' for the couple to be able to move to the United States together, and in late 1984, Peláez was snatched on the street together with her cameraman by Túpac Amaru, a Marxist revolutionary movement. The pair were blindfolded and taken to interview the group's leaders. Peláez and her cameraman were freed after the television station agreed to broadcast the resulting propaganda film. Shortly after the ordeal, Peláez moved to the United States as a political refugee, citing fears of further attacks. It is hard to say whether this was an unfortunate coincidence or something that the KGB arranged using contacts in the Marxist

underground, either with or without the knowledge of Lazaro and Peláez. Tracy Wilkinson, 'Guerrillas Release Two Reporters', United Press International, 9 Dec. 1984, upi.com; and La Serna, *With Masses and Arms*, 34–8, have details of the kidnapping.

19. The FBI had already managed to recruit the SVR's deputy resident, Sergei Tretyakov, who spent several years working as a double agent and divulged everything he knew about the inner workings of the mission to the Americans.

20. *Alumni Newsletter*, James Madison University Justice Studies Department, Jan. 2015.

21. Interview with intelligence source, 2020.

22. It's possible that some of the initial information might also have come from another defector, Alexander Shcherbakov. See Wise, *Seven Million Dollar Spy*, for the full details of that extraordinary case.

23. For this and other details of the FBI pursuit of Bezrukov and Vavilova, I have used the case materials released by the FBI, and Strzok, *Compromised*, 3–36.

24. Interview with Elena Vavilova.

25. Coll, *Directorate S*, 31–2.

26. Interview with former CIA officer.

25. Operation Ghost Stories: *The FBI Swoops*

1. After his retirement from espionage, Lazaro taught political science at Baruch College in New York City. He made no attempt to hide his leftist, anti-imperialist slant on US foreign policy, which made him an outlier in the department. Students loved Dr Lazaro and his strident views and gave him universally positive reviews. 'I have never had a course impact me as much as this course has in my two years at Baruch. He made me think differently about my own country,' read one typical end-of-semester assessment stored away in the Baruch archives. While Lazaro clearly had a Marxist-inspired view of the Main Enemy, he had made a comfortable life there with the Centre's help, and he had no desire to return to Russia. After three decades undercover, the man who had been born Mikhail Vasenkov was much more comfortable being Juan Lazaro. The SVR granted him leave to live out his retirement in his cover identity.

2. Corera, *Russians Among Us*, 92–3.

3. Interview with Khrushcheva, 2019.

4. Corera, *Russians Among Us*, 129–30.

5. Interview with Elena Vavilova, 2021.

6. On a couple of occasions when Tim and Alex were very young, Andrei and Elena managed to arrange with the Centre for a three-generation family meet-up in a neutral Asian country so that their parents could see their grandchildren. They were reluctant to go into details of when this happened or how exactly it worked. Tim and Alex have only the vaguest of memories of these meetings. Later, when the children grew older, the visits stopped, because it would have been immediately apparent to Tim and Alex that something was not quite right with their 'Canadian' grandparents.

7. This scene is described on page 220 of Elena's novel. There, it happens outside Quito. She told me the basic facts of the scene were true, though she declined to go into details about where it really happened and in which year.

8. Corera, *Russians Among Us*, 179.

9. Alexander Topping and Miriam Elder, 'Britain Admits "Fake Rock" Plot to Spy on Russians', *Guardian*, 19 Jan. 2012, theguardian.com.

10. Corera, *Russians Among Us*, 234.
11. Ilona Yegiazarova, '100-letiu sluzhby vneshnei razvedki. Lyudmila Nuikina: Mne s muzhem ochen povezlo', *Moskovskaya Pravda*, 30 Oct. 2020, mospravda.ru.
12. Quoted in Corera, *Russians Among Us*, 242.
13. Details from the in absentia court trial of Poteyev, as reported in Yuri Senatorov, 'Za vydayushchiye zaslugi', *Kommersant*, 28 June 2011, kommersant.ru. US sources have not commented on the details of Poteyev's escape, and it is of course possible that the Russian claims are either guesswork or misinformation.
14. The recollection is based on an interview conducted with a source who preferred to remain anonymous. Tim denied to me that he had ever been told anything about his parents' work or identities. Allegations that he did know are in Devlin Barrett, 'Russian Spy Ring Aimed to Make Children Agents', *Wall Street Journal*, 31 July 2012, wsj.com.
15. It is worth noting that the FBI released excerpts from wiretaps selectively and might have cherry-picked conversations that made the illegals seem incompetent or pointless and excised moments when the information they sent was more useful.
16. Maria Makutina, '"Chto kasaetsya predatelei, oni sami zagnutsya"', *Kommersant*, 16 Dec. 2010.
17. Vladimir Solovyov and Vladislav Trifonov, 'Svezho predatelstvo', *Kommersant*, 11 Nov. 2010, kommersant.ru.
18. Details of Andrei and Elena's meeting with Drozdov come from her emailed responses to my questions.
19. Pierre Briançon, 'The Spanish Story of a Russian Illegal', *Politico*, 16 June 2016; interviews with sources.
20. *United States of America v. Evgeny Burakov, a/k/a 'Zhenya', Igor Sporyshev, and Victor Podobnyy*, sealed complaint, Southern District of New York, 23 Jan. 2015, justice.gov. One of the SVR officers allowed that some illegal networks in Asia or the Middle East might still be active.

26. The Virtual Illegals: *Election Meddling and Easy Deniability*

1. See, for example, Mark Galeotti, 'Russia's Murderous Adhocracy', *Moscow Times*, 22 Aug. 2020, themoscowtimes.com.
2. Interviews carried out in 2015; Shaun Walker, 'The Russian Troll Factory at the Heart of the Meddling Allegations', *Guardian*, 2 April 2015, theguardian.com.
3. Justice Department, *United States of America v. Internet Research Agency LLC et al.*, filed 16 Feb. 2018, justice.gov; Kenneth P. Vogel, 'How Russian Trolls Crept into the Trump Campaign's Facebook Messages', *New York Times*, 8 March 2018; Corera, *Russians Among Us*, 363–4.
4. Olivia Solon and Sabrina Siddiqui, 'Russia-Backed Facebook Posts "Reached 126M Americans" During US Election', *Guardian*, 31 Oct. 2017, theguardian.com.
5. See, for example, Michael Schwirtz, 'Top Secret Russian Unit Seeks to Destabilize Europe, Security Officials Say', *New York Times*, 8 Oct. 2019, nytimes.com.
6. In 2014, US authorities detected a suspected Russian hit man lurking in the vicinity of Poteyev's new home in Florida and scrambled to move the defector. Then, in 2016, Russian sources announced Poteyev had died. But he was still alive: the ploy was most likely a ruse in hopes that the defector might contact his family in Russia to give a sign of life, and in the process expose his new location. See Adam Goldman et al., 'US Spies Rush to Protect

Defectors After Skripal Poisoning', *New York Times*, 13 Sept. 2018, nytimes.com; and Alex Campbell, Jason Leopold, and Heidi Blake, 'This Russian Double Agent Is a Lot Less Dead Than He Seemed', *BuzzFeed News*, 4 Oct. 2018, buzzfeednews.com.

7. 'Prezident pozdravil sotrudnikov i veteranov SVR s 95-letiem nelegalnoi razvedki', 28 June 2017, kremlin.ru.

27. The Lives of Wonderful People: *The Cult of the Illegal*

1. 'Sem zhiznei polkovnika Shevchenko', NTV.
2. Ekaterina Mirnaya, 'Kompyutery – rodine. Kak semya nelegalov dobyla neftyanye i raketnye sekrety', *Argumenty i Fakty*, 3 July 2020, aif.ru.
3. MITN 2/16/3, p. 498.
4. McKnight, *Espionage and the Roots of the Cold War*, 50.

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1. Dan Sabbagh, 'Russian Spy Caught Trying to Infiltrate War Crimes Court, Says Netherlands', *Guardian*, 16 June 2022, theguardian.com; Jon Henley and Pjotr Sauer, 'Norway Arrests "Brazilian Researcher" Accused of Spying for Russia', *Guardian*, 25 Oct. 2022, theguardian.com.
2. Shaun Walker, Pjotr Sauer, and Tom Phillips, 'Panic and Emotional Pain as Alleged Deep-Cover Russian Spies Vanish', *Guardian*, 3 April 2023, theguardian.com.
3. All the Slovenia detail in this section is from my own reporting there, with the exception of the detail about the fridge, which is from Georgi Kantchev, Joe Parkinson and Silvina Frydlewsky, 'The Russian Spies Next Door', *Wall Street Journal*, 17 June 2024, wsj.com.
4. Christo Grozev, unpublished research. The same names are given in the *Wall Street Journal* article referenced in the previous note and were announced by Russian authorities when the couple returned home.
5. 'Vozrashchennye domoi Rossiyane soobshchili detali obmena v Turtsii', *Vesti*, 5 Aug. 2024, vesti.ru.
6. I slightly condensed the response for clarity and brevity, without altering the meaning.

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AJ	Yugoslavia Archive (Serbia)
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
ČT	Czech Television Archive
DCC	Dublin Chess Club (Ireland)
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
FSB	Federal Security Service (Russia)
GAIO	State Archive of Irkutsk Region (Russia)
LOC	Library of Congress (United States)
MfS	Ministry of State Security of the German Democratic Republic
MITN	Mitrokhin Archive, Churchill Archives Centre, Cambridge (United Kingdom)
NACR	National Archive of Costa Rica
NARB	National Archive of the Republic of Belarus
RGASPI	Russian State Archive of Social and Political History
RGVA	Russian State Military Archive
SZRU	Foreign Intelligence Service of Ukraine
TNA	National Archive, Kew (United Kingdom)
VAA	Vatican Apostolic Archive (Vatican City)
VN	Vassiliev Notebooks (United States)
ZSN	*Za Sovetskuyu Nauku* (Russia)

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